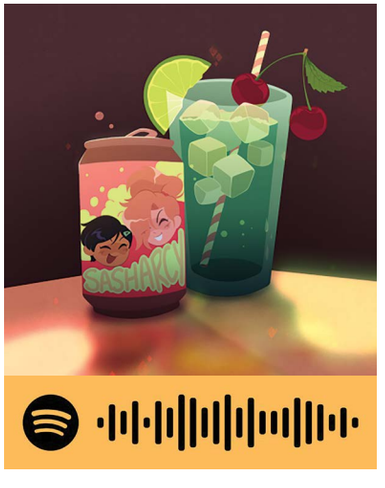
CHERRY
LIMEADE
Cherry Limeade
03:41
BFFS!
a sasharcy fanzine

Cherry Limeade

A Sasharcy Fanzine

Psst... hey! Scan this spotify code to listen to our playlist while you read the zine!



FOREWORD

When we came up with the name Cherry Limeade, we were a group of friends (and strangers) all in a group chat on Twitter of all places. Since then, our project evolved into a sensational and incredible zine with a powerhouse mod team and insanely talented contributors. Without either, we wouldn't have been able to create such a collection. But it wasn't just us who were able to bring our love of Sasharcy to life. It was every single person who bought from our zine and helped fund it that made it all possible. So sit back, relax, and please enjoy Cherry Limeade: A Sasharcy Fanzine!

Cherry Limeade

Mod Team

A Playground Fit for Two

Written by Idori
Spot Art by Amory Lang (huath3art)

Summary

With Anne gone for the day, a young Sasha and Marcy find themselves on the playground alone... together. Between anime and battles of magnificent sorts, they realize that you don't always need three to have fun.

Flavour of Sasharcy

Childhood, Pre-Amphibia

Her head dips back as she pushes against the tiled floor, knees digging into the bottom of her desk as she tips the chair back, an un-idle fit of action that would have her falling backwards if not for how often she'd done it in the past. She could only keep it up for so long, however, clock upside down and unreadable in her field of vision. Almost unreadable, if not again for the fact that she'd done this before. Her teacher called her name – a scolding to sit correctly – and she bit back a petulant retort. Begrudgingly, the feet of her chair came back to solid ground. The clock ticked in the background.

Waiting patiently – as patiently as any child could, legs batting back and forth under her desk, homework neatly shoved into a folder that she wouldn't reopen at home – she listened to the end of class drone, a reminder of assignments due that were far less important than what awaited her after class. Her packing was rapid, animal erasers and sparkly glitter pens thrown similarly into a pencil case, backpack zipped and at the ready in preparation to bolt through the door the moment it was socially acceptable to do so. The ring of the bell found Sasha out first, leading the pack by margins as she raced outside. She'd made sure to get everything from her locker earlier; there were no side trips to derail her.

Outside, the sunlight was strong, but nothing would stop her bulls track, searching faces and arriving at the spot by the school sign her dad always liked to pick her up at. He wasn't here yet, but that was okay. He was never too late, and when he was, the ice cream he would treat her with was more than an acceptable apology.

"Oh, there's my little princess!"

She turned, ramming into his chest with reckless abandon, and like a man who knew his daughter well he scooped her up, strong hands pulling her into a twirl that brought them close, a hug that was nothing but warm until she pulled away. Wriggling out, she beamed up at him as his hand came to ruffle – and mess up – her hair. She dodged, high and small ponytail untouched as she grabbed his hand instead.

"You're late," she said, taking charge and pulling him along. "But it's okay. I forgive you. Anne and Marbles are probably at the park already, so we have to go."

"What? No hi for your old man? Just straight to adventure?" Her father laughed, and yet he wandered alongside her, hands conjoined because he would never let her be without. "Such a go-getter! Just like your mother."

Pointedly, she didn't look at him as she responded, a blush falling on the high cheekbones she shared with him. "Hi, Dad. You're late!"

Again he laughed, following her lead. "That I am. Very sorry to keep you waiting, Princess Sasha; it won't happen again." It probably would, they both knew, but that was alright. "Tell me, little lamb; what did you do in school today?"

It was routine, too, to tell him about how things had gone when he was picking her up. She'd do it over the dinner table with her mom, but nothing made her feel as great as she did with her father's attention on her. An answer rolled off her tongue – the same old learning and lectures in class, but spirit week was upcoming, and she wanted her class to score as many points as possible – easily, and before she knew it the rehashing of her day had brought them both to the park she'd coveted.

"Now, Sasha," he said to her as they stepped onto the playground. "I have work, so make sure you don't leave. And if you do, make sure you ring up your mother. You'll be going with her tonight– I'll call later today."

"Yeah, okay." The frown couldn't be helped, but she was above throwing a fit over it by now. "I'm going to go find Anne and Marcy. You promise you'll call?"

"I promise, princess." He leaned down, and Sasha rose to the tips of her toes, small frame made taller by a stretch as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I love you, sweetheart. Go have fun."

"I love you too," she returned. "Have fun at work." She couldn't see what was so fun about it at all, but she'd heard her mom say them enough to him to want to pick it up, waving to his retreating back. Once he'd left her line of sight, she pivoted, marching over to where she knew the Wu's and Boonchuy's were gathered.

As predicted, Marcy was there, rushing up and meeting her halfway with a grin that split her face. "Hey, Sash!"

"Hey, Marmar." That smile was contagious, but as she looked around, it fell from her face. From the playscape to the swings, to the really big slide she liked to climb, her gaze and person wandered, lips tugging down as the object she was seeking evaded her view. "Is Anne late?"

"Oh, she's not coming."

Marcy's words forced her to a halt, frozen midstep as Sasha looked at her, eyebrows furrowed, lips creasing, pulled together as her head whipped around. "Not coming? What do you mean she's not coming?"

Maybe she could be forgiven for the way her voice slipped a pitch higher, or the way her shoulders drew back. Or maybe she should be the one apologizing as Marcy winced. "She had a doctor's appointment today, so she left early. She should be able to come over tomorrow for the sleepover, but today it's just us."

Her hand clenched tightly, and her displeasure must have been obvious – her mom wouldn't like that – because Marcy chuckled the same chuckle she gave when they were playing sports in gym and she was chosen for the opposite team without Anne or her, and it only served to make her feel worse.

"You didn't know?"

“No,” Sasha spat. “Nobody told me that.” And wasn’t that an issue? Friends were supposed to tell each other things like this. How were they supposed to all spend time together if Anne was ditching them at the last second? Even if it was a doctor’s appointment and they didn’t share any classes, she still could have called and made sure she knew!

“Maybe she just forgot?” At her glare, Marcy backpedaled. Sasha felt a little bad for it. “I mean, I didn’t know until this morning— and that’s only because my mom told me before school.”

“Maybe.” Did it make it better if Anne had forgotten? She’d obviously told Marcy; or her mom had told her mom who had told her, but it was the principle of the matter. Sasha had been kept out of the loop. Her fisted hand grabbed the chain of the swings, destination chosen as she sat, Marcy close behind her. In silence they sat, until Marcy kicked her legs back and chose to lean in close enough from the side that Sasha could feel her hovering by her shoulder.

“Did you see yesterday’s episode of ***Super Sailor Fighters Z***?”

“No.”

“Well, you should watch it soon. Shining Agate finally unlocked her new transformation, and Burning Topaz found all the stones needed to release the Wish Dragon. I think Moonstone is going to betray them though. She was being way more suspicious than she was back when they were at the Crystal Pond, and Lustrous Diamond mentioned way back in the prophecy that there’d only be trouble when the ‘sun turned black,’ right?”

“What does that have to do with her betraying them? Moonstone would never.” It was just like Marcy, to fill the silence with a subject neither of them could ignore. Hastily, Sasha added on: “Shining Agate has her brother’s heart crystal; she literally can’t betray them, even if she wanted to. And she’s a good guy! Just because Silver Citrine did it doesn’t mean she will.”

“But Moonstone is the only one between them all who hasn’t gotten an upgrade,” said Marcy. “And she’s the one that was asking questions about the obsidian crown! Silver Citrine mentioned that there was an eclipse almost eighteen years ago, which means another one is coming soon; and that means the crown will reveal itself again. What happens if she ends up taking the stones behind Burning Topaz’s back?”

“Then it’d be a lot of trouble, but you don’t think she’d really put her brother in danger like that, do you?”

“If she gets the crown, maybe it won’t matter. Nobody else really knows what it does–”

“So why risk it? She has a guaranteed way to get her brother back and be a hero at the same time right now.”

“Maybe she’s scared?”

That was it. Off the swings Sasha went, with Marcy scrambling to follow after her. “Moonstone doesn’t get scared. She’s the protector! The bravest fighter there is.”

“But she’s not the strongest right now. Everyone else is stronger than her. They don’t need her to protect them anymore.”

Up the playscape they went, monkey bars traversed (that Marcy chose to go around) to a second landing that led up to one of the slides. “Just because they’re stronger right now doesn’t mean she won’t protect them. Shining Agate just got her transformation, right? But she doesn’t know how to use it at all. Moonstone is still her hero– I think if there really is a fight, she won’t be able to do much.”

“Hmmmm.” And to the slide they ended up, Sasha set up as first to go down, though they normally played slide tag when Anne was here. There was no need, it seemed, with only the two of them. “Maybe. I don’t know. Guess you’ll just have to watch the episode, Sash.”

Stubborn Sasha was, Marcy’s acquisition met with a puffed up chest that was miles away from her previous demeanor. “Trust me, Marbles,” she said before she launched herself down the slide. “I know my characters.”

Alone at the top, Marcy scuffed her shoe at the playscape ground, counting to ten to make sure the coast was clear for her to slide down as well. She trusted Sasha, of course. Her predictions made watching the show even more fun than it normally was, even if it was one of the few things they could agree on; but the fact of the matter was that Marcy had seen the ending of the very episode Sasha hadn’t. There wouldn’t be any spoilers on her end – last time she had done that, Sasha had been none too pleased – but that didn’t mean keeping quiet wasn’t difficult.

Moonstone had, after all, protected Shining Agate from danger against the Mason Atelier, but it had only been after Shining Agate’s transformation that they’d really been safe. Almost downed and cornered, Silver Citrine’s actions in the previous episodes bore ominous warnings to the fates of the two heroes, Moonstone jumping into the fray headfirst, so determined that Marcy couldn’t help but like her, all to keep what was precious to her safe. Her tenacity and courage was something she could only hope for in the future, but it was those very same principles that–

“Marmar?”

At the top of the slide Sasha was once more, hands outstretched to hold herself against the large shell tubing. It wasn't good practice to walk back up the slide after using it, but Marcy had been taking way too long, and going around the rest of the playscape would take too much time. This was faster, and far more efficient. What did her mom always say? Time is money? And they were burning daylight standing around. The effect her name had on her was instant; Marcy blinked, broken out of thought, and looked around, jaw falling open at the sight before her.

"Sash! You can't come up the slide like that! What if I was going down?"

Sasha rolled her eyes, expectant pout demanding to be forgiven. "You were the one taking so long. I just wanted to see what was up." She turned away, back to facing the abyss. "Hurry on down. We have more things to do."

And gone she was once more, leaving Marcy by her lonesome at the top. She frowned, but Sasha wanted what she wanted, and they were on limited time. Quickly she moved, waiting another appropriate span of time before descending. The slide was a familiar comfort, winding down to the group, the only piece of equipment that didn't leave a build-up of static in her clothes and person. Sasha quickly came into view at the bottom, body blocking the slide, arm outstretched to the side to… box her in?

No. It was the opposite. Sasha wasn't facing her, but the people – all new – around her. Marcy dusted herself off as she stood, taking the steps to peer around Sasha's arm to see three girls standing menacingly, glares clearly aimed for them both.

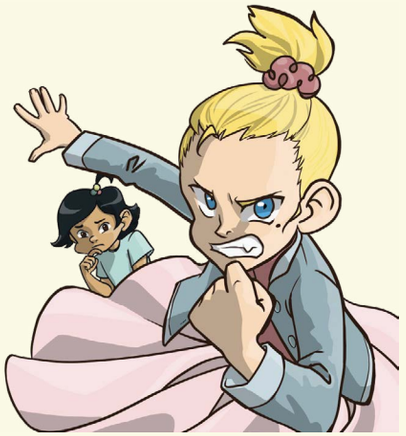
"This is our playground," the middle and largest girl said. Her front tooth was missing, and her eyes were like daggers that could kill. "We don't let little babies play here. I've never seen you two around, so you better scram while I'm still feeling nice about it."

"What the heck," Sasha muttered under her breath, scowl and a similar glare pressed over her features. "There's something wrong with you if you think we're leaving! We were here first. If anything, you should scram! We've been coming here forever."

"Please, like I believe that! This is our turf." The girl – Toothless, Sasha decided to call her – settled her hands on her hips, leaning forward. She was taller than her and didn't care to hide it. "I'm giving you one more chance to leave, or else I'll kick you out myself."

"You can't do that!" piped Marcy from behind. "This playground is a public park; it's open to anyone. Trying to run people out of it is–"

"I don't care, nerd!" Off her hip, Toothless pointed directly at Marcy. Sasha's teeth grit. "It's our playground. That's what I just said! Or were you too busy reading up on all the school rules to follow next time you have to kiss up to a teacher? Do you think she does that? Or do you think she sits alone with all her nerd books?" At her side, the other girls laughed. Sasha's hand clenched, and the shocked gasp behind her was all the prompting she needed to charge forward.



"I bet you two aren't even friends. How'd you convince– woah—!" Toothless backpedaled, Sasha's fist missing its mark by a large margin, but that didn't deter her. "Hey! We didn't even start, but if it's a fight you really want… Annabelle!" The other blonde girl to Sasha's right stood to attention, looking between her and Toothless. "Teach this twerp a lesson!"

"On it, boss!" Annabelle was quick to comply, and against the other larger foe, Sasha was forced to withdraw, putting as much space between them for a bit as she could. Only for a little, mostly to make sure they were further away from the slide. The other two didn't seem to care to fight just yet, blatantly mimicking the battle pattern of a super villain team, or some Mafia boss who would always send out minions to do their dirty work before they were all defeated. She would be the hero here; just like Moonstone, Sasha didn't need some fancy power-up to protect her friends.

Imitating Sasha's earlier actions, Annabelle rushed at her, another narrow miss from what would have been a devastating shove. She could thank her progressive physical activity for letting her get out of the way, and her knowledge of the playground. "Stop dodging and come here!" yelled Annabelle. Sasha stuck her tongue out at her.

It was at the edge of the wood chips that she waited, letting Annabelle charge at her one more time before moving out of the way, ankle hooking on ankle as the older girl met the ground. If Sasha's foot hadn't done it, then the small wood partition between the wood chips and grass would have. One down, two to go. She turned back to see the other two bullies, and Toothless only gave a look and a nod before pointing at her again. "Get her!"

The second girl was much faster than the first, gaining on Sasha quickly where before the chase had been even. She couldn't just fight her; she needed another plan now that she was on the defensive. From the wood chips to the grass and back onto the wood chips, she took them around the playscape, juking her out and gaining distance, set on getting behind her at the monkey bars before something sailed over her head.

A narrow miss, the stick landed somewhere at her side. "Hey! That's not fair!" She yelled. It wasn't. That was a total disregard of the playground fight rules. What, was she actually trying to hurt her? Of course they were trying to hurt each other, but she just needed them gone so she and Marcy could play in peace again.

"All's fair in love and war, blondie!"

"That's not how you're supposed to use that!"

"Oh yeah?" Hiding behind the slide she'd come down with Marcy minutes ago, Sasha heard the thunk of wood against it. "You should have thought about that before picking a fight with us!"

"You guys started it! Everyone who comes here can play on the playground!"

"Well, I'm going to end it then! We don't like babies or nerds or twerps or brats here!"

Once more, that was enough. From her spot of safety Sasha charged, anger and pride burning at her. Not only were they insulting her, but they were insulting Marcy, and protecting her friends was always justification to fight back. Her recklessness proved to be too much, however, and the second girl caught her just in time, hands shoving rough enough to stop Sasha's momentum and send her back-first onto the wood chips.

"You lose." Looming above, the girl seemed a million times larger, a shadow blocking the sun, darkness in and of itself that promised nothing but pain. "I'm gonna–"

Unexpectedly, the laughter came, loud peels of it echoing through the playscape. Shadow Girl turned around, attention suddenly off Sasha, who craned her head and lifted herself up to get a better view of whatever was happening. Her eyes widened, a shocked gasp stealing from her at the sight: there, pants around her legs, unicorns printed for all to see, stood Toothless, face red, with Marcy right behind her. It was Annabelle who had since gotten up who was laughing, and it didn't take long for Shadow Girl to join in.

"Is that– Princess Celestia?" Between the girl's laughter, they managed to get the words out, and upon further inspection Sasha found that it was the horse princess of the 'baby's show' she'd been hearing about around school. It wasn't a baby's show much, she thought, but that wouldn't stop her from pushing an advantage when she saw it.

"Isn't she from a kid's show? Are you sure you're not the baby who should be leaving?"

Sputtering, it was only a matter of time before the embarrassment got to her. "That's–hey! Stop laughing!" Toothless went ignored, before she finally found her wits and pulled her pants back up. "This isn't over! You're lucky we have things to do. Annabelle! Madison! Come on. We can go hang out somewhere else." Marching up to her friend, she grabbed her hand before pulling Annabelle away. Shadow Girl – Madison – was quick to follow, leaving Sasha to get up and make her way to her partner in crime.

"Marbles, that was amazing!" The praise came quickly, stars shining in her eyes and voice. Sure, Marcy was just as much of a loose cannon as she could be, but when it came to confrontation, she tended to freeze up. She was definitely doing that here, shuffling with her hands behind her back. "You totally got her! I didn't think you had it in you."

"Well," Marcy said, hands wringing together unseen, a light dust of pink across her face. "Maybe I had my own transformation. I can't let you do all the work forever." Just like Agate had taken that step forward when Moonstone was downed, Marcy would transform and put a stop to the evil-doings before them. That didn't mean she could meet Sasha's eyes saying it, the warm and fluttery feeling in her chest way too confusing to ignore every time Sasha did something 'cool' or 'heroic', but it meant that one day, she would get there.

In the meantime, she had to contend with the large grin, arm coming to sling around her shoulder as the blonde proudly declared: "We make a good team!" Her fist pumped in the air, and Marcy was enamored by how pretty she was, right next to her, backlit by the soon to be setting sun and playground equipment. It brought a large smile to her face too, and the sight of a far-better-looking gap-tooth grin had Sasha pausing too, settling a stare on the features of her friend.

"You're right, Sash." Marcy said as she beamed up at her, and Sasha felt her heart skip a beat, a way too foreign and familiar feeling she'd only felt before near Anne buzzing in her insides. "I think we do!"

Marcy stepped away from her, but their separation was only for a moment. "To team victory!" She said, and Sasha followed along in her cheer.

"To team victory!"

With the rest of the afternoon dedicated to swinging, playing out one of Marcy's old gameboy games, and sliding to their heart's content… maybe it wasn't so bad that it was just the two of them. It would have been nice if Anne had come–

But that didn't mean she was necessary for them to get along.

XXX

At the lunch table the next day, it didn't take Anne long to spot her friends. She'd brought food from home again, but had stayed a bit after to get her missing work to take home, even if she didn't want to do it. Sasha and Marcy were deep in conversation, both lighting up as she scooted into the space across from them.

"Anne!"

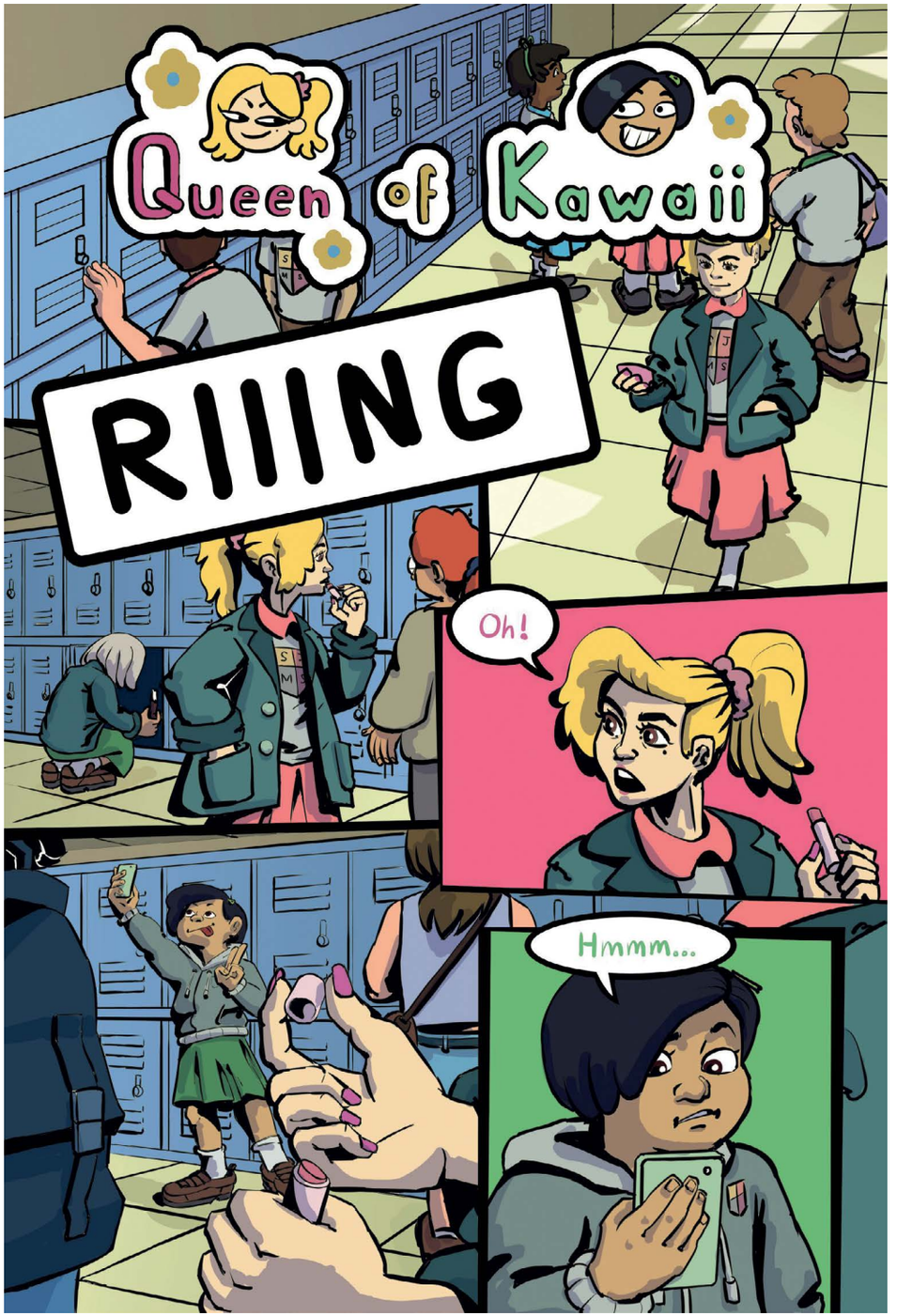
The double-inflected shout brought a sheepish smile to her face. "Hey girls. Sorry about yesterday. I–"

"Had a doctor's appointment, we know. It's all good, Anne." Leave it to Sasha to cut into things with nothing but cool. Still, the way she leaned forward with her hands on the table let her know there was something more to her than being happy to see her again.

Her theory was proven correct quickly, as Marcy took up her place. "Oh Anne, you'll never believe it! Yesterday Sasha and I–"

And thus went the lunch period, a woven tale of feats and heroics. Sure, Anne was a bit sad to have missed it, but that was Sasha and Marcy for her. They were the best of friends, after all. It only made sense.

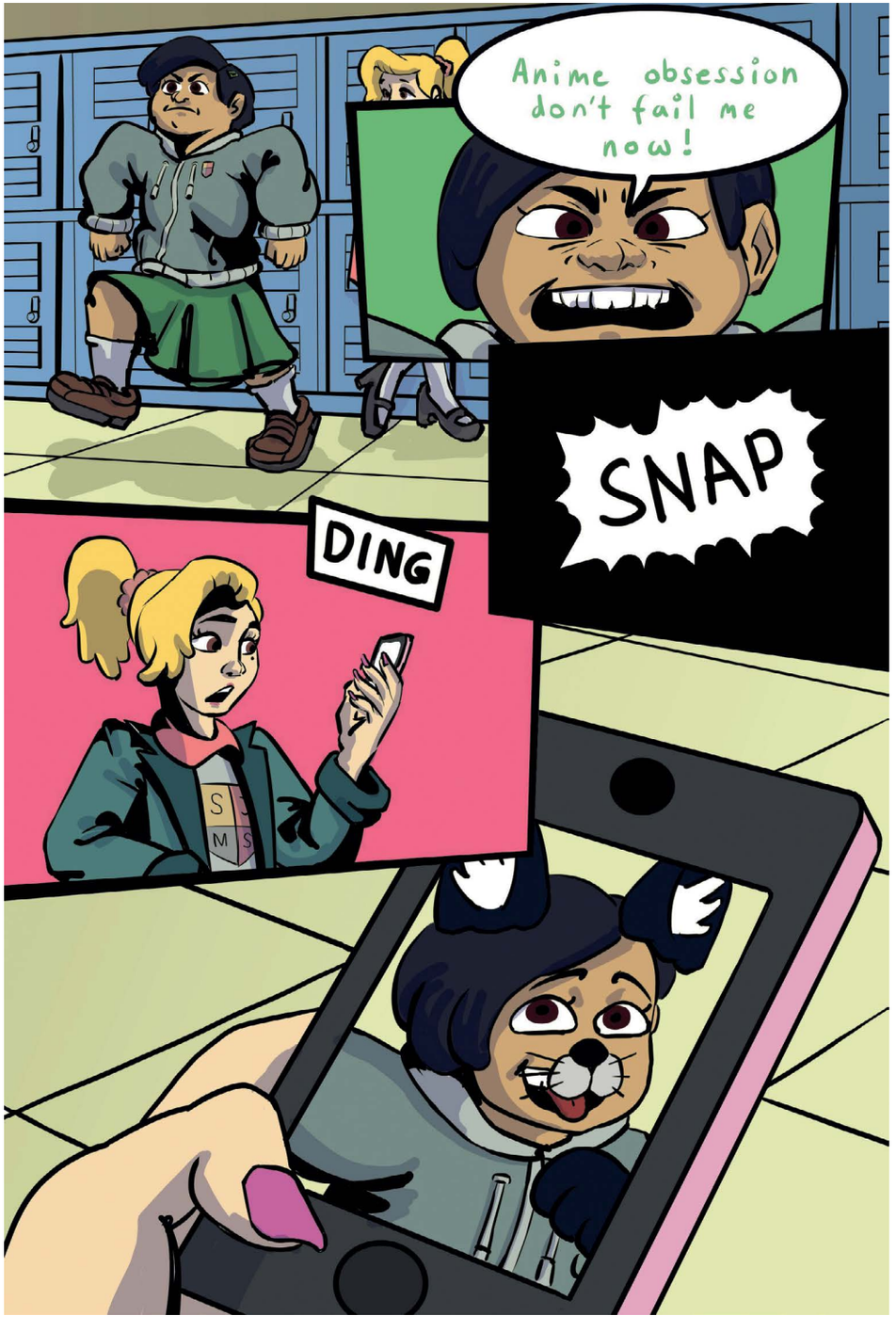
maxiiiiiii!!!!
Sash-kun
"Let's be kawaii together. Forever, Marcy-chan..."
愛してるぜ!!

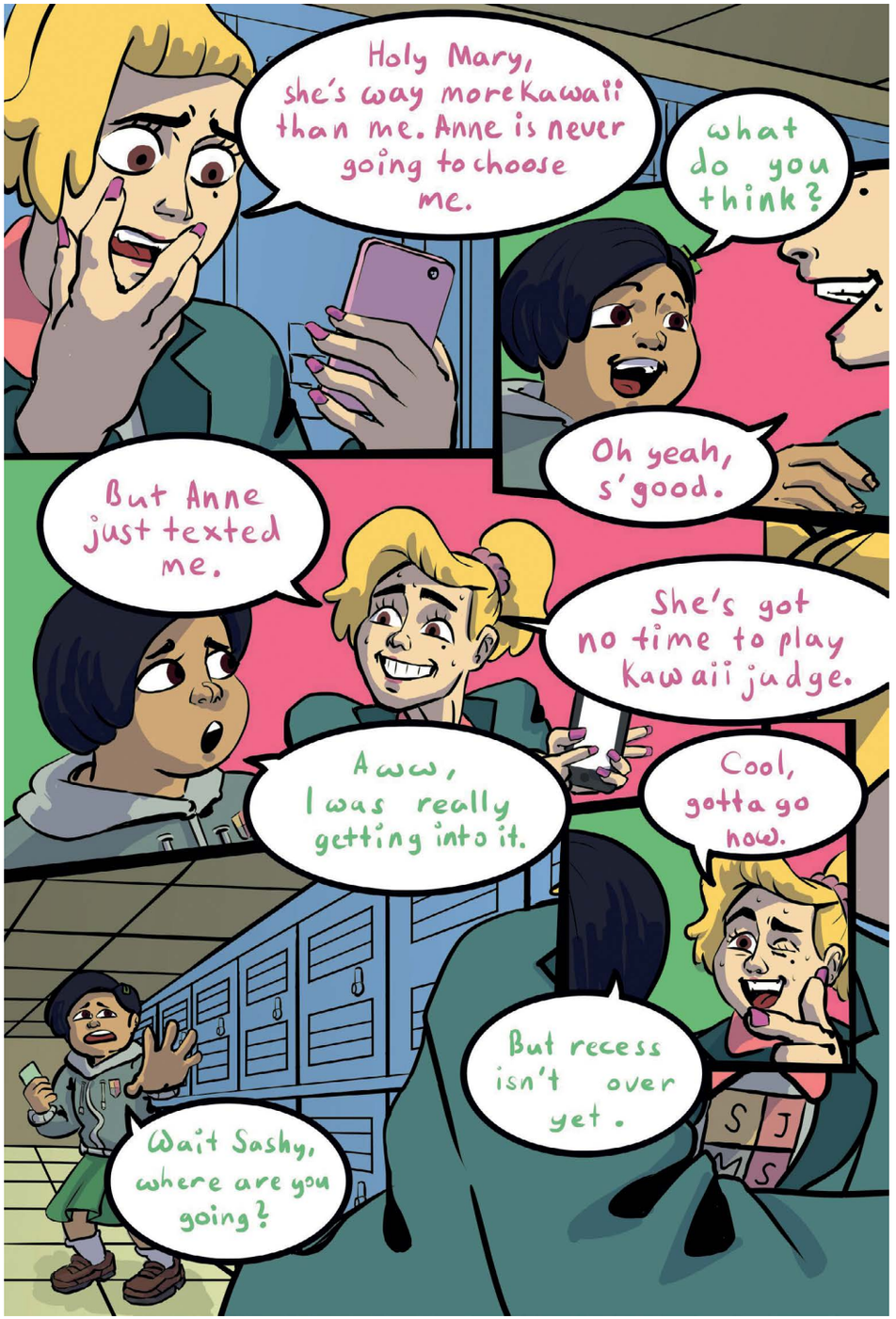

Queen of Kawaii
RIIING
Oh!
Hmmm...

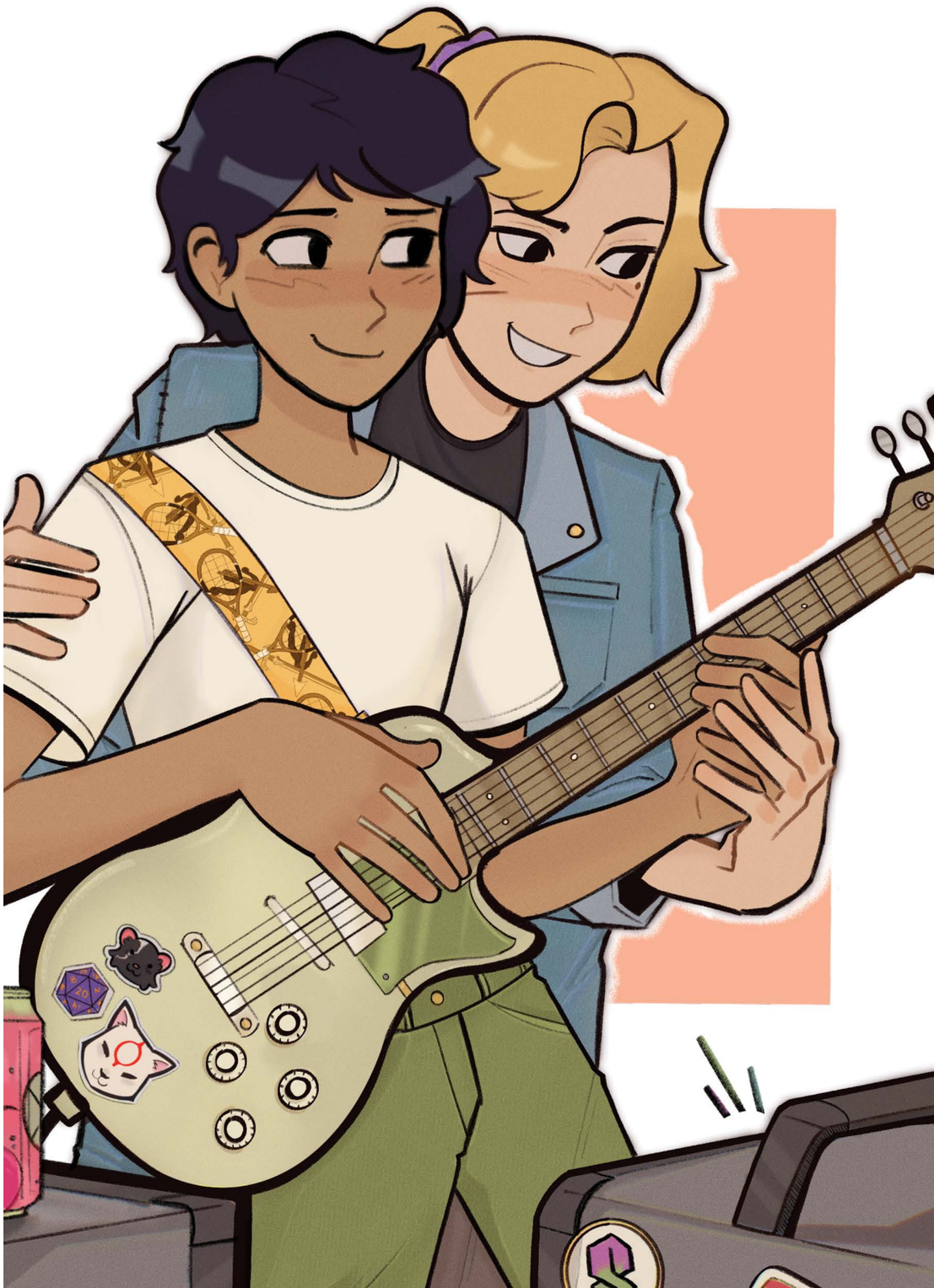
Hey Maaars, whatcha doin'?
I am making a super Kawaii profile pic for my social media.
SLAM
Oh, hi Sash.
Sure. I think I'll use this one.
whaaaaat? No way, lemme see!
Hmmm..., not bad. But it could be better.
You think?
I KNOW! Afterall, I'm the Queen of Kawaii.
We'll both take the most Kawaii selfie we can.
You are?
Heh, I'll prove it to ya!
And then Anne will choose the winner.

TAP
Anne stp wht ur doin I need u 2 play Kawaii judge
TAP
DING
Move, I need room.
Now watch this!
SNAP
TAP
TAP
DING

S-so Kawaii...
SLAM
Now top that.
I don't know if I can.
Aww, is widdle Marcy a quitter now?
I'm older than you, Sasha. Just give me a moment.
Atta girl.

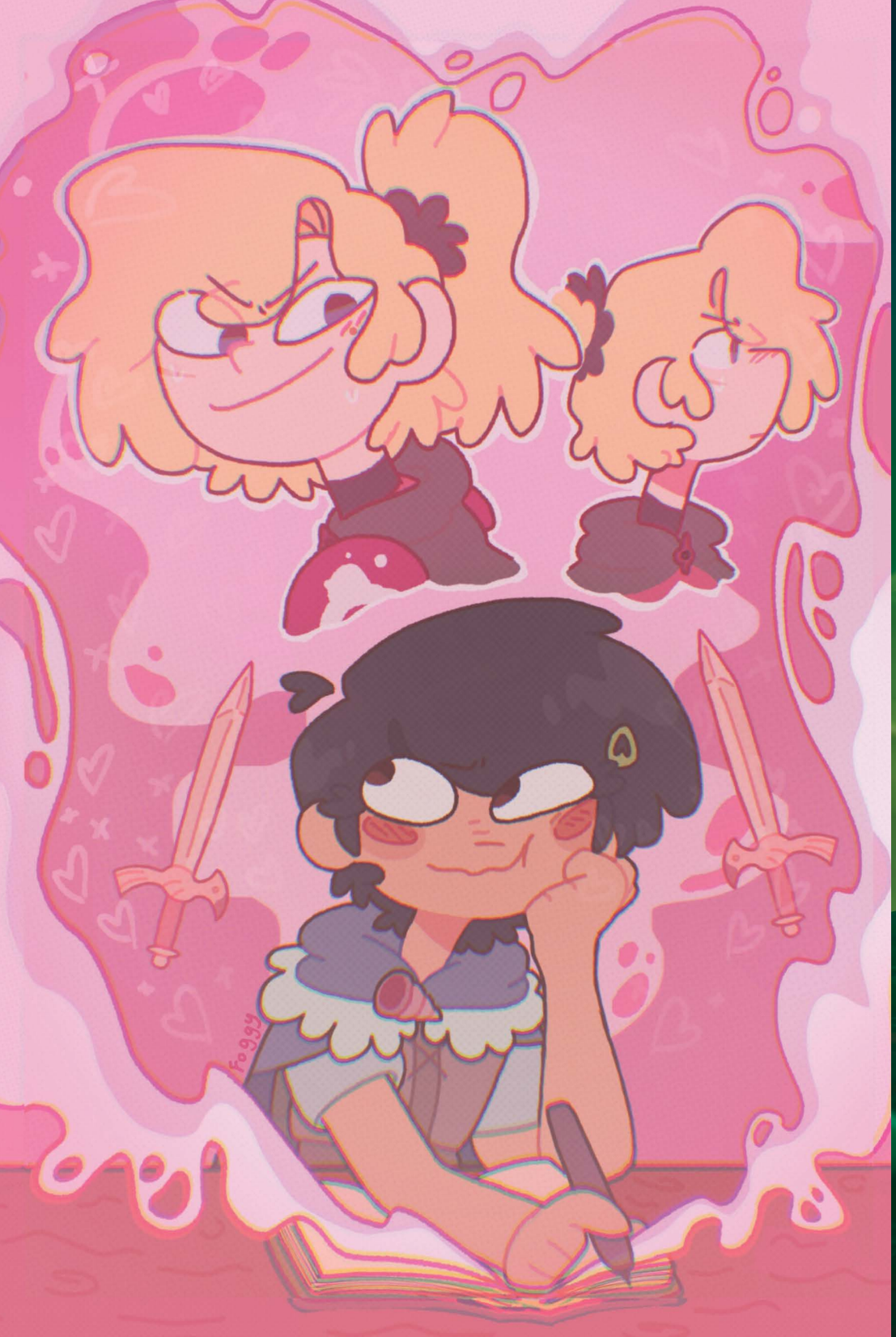

Anime obsession don't fail me now!
SNAP
DING


Holy Mary, she's way more Kawaii than me. Anne is never going to choose me.
what do you think?
Oh yeah, s'good.
But Anne just texted me.
She's got no time to play Kawaii judge.
Awww, I was really getting into it.
Cool, gotta go now.
But recess isn't over yet.
Wait Sashy, where are you going?

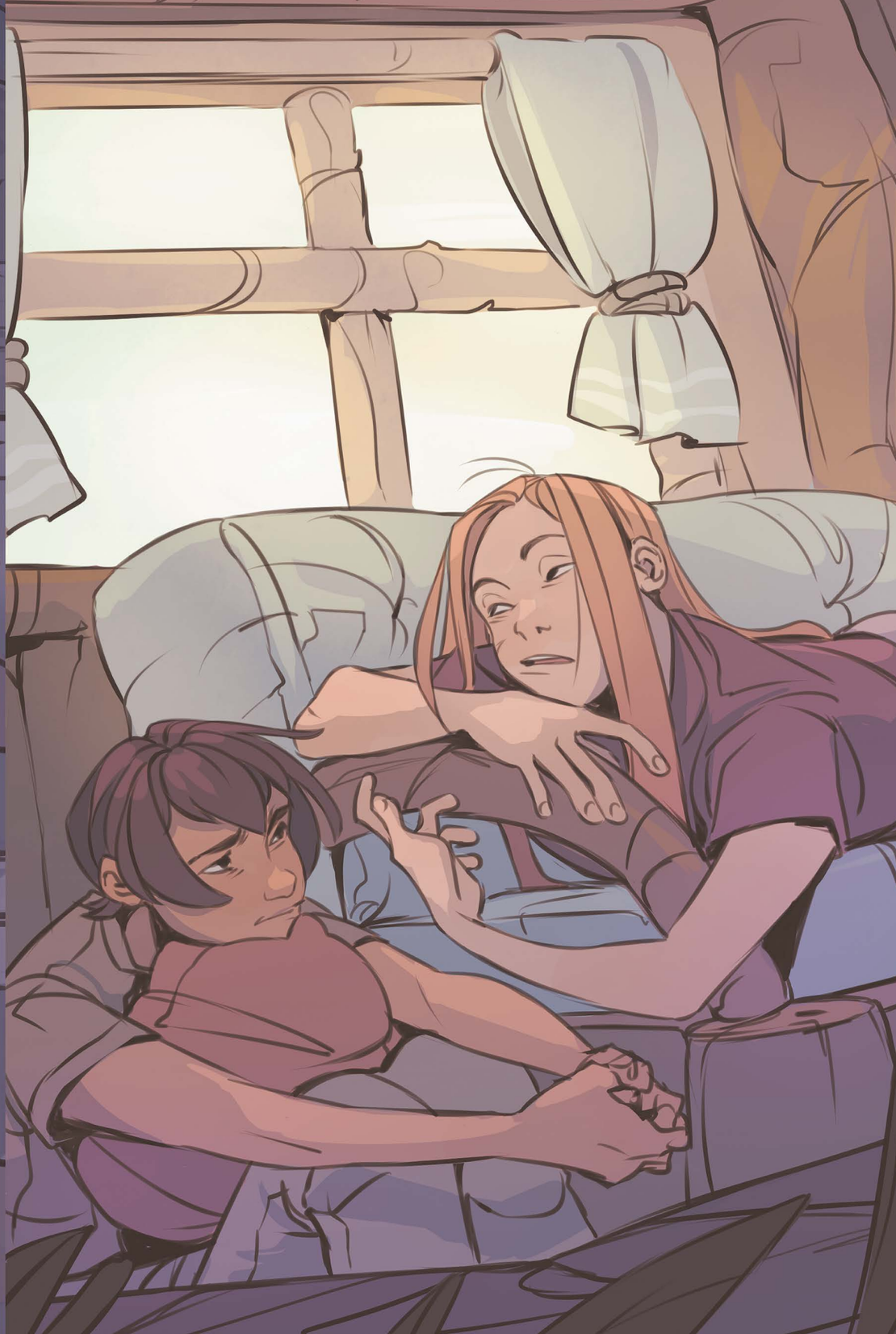


If you could see I'm th

understands you


foggy

@ICEYMOONSHARDS



If Love Conquers All, Then All Else Must Have Failed

Written by Puddlesock
Spot Art by junepegbert

Summary

In the wake of a dangerous rescue operation, Marcy is left comatose in the resistance infirmary. With nothing to do but wait, Sasha must confront her feelings on everything that's happened.

Flavour of Sasharcy

Canon Divergent, Amphibia

It was meant to be a simple mission. Get in, get Marcy, get out.

But when were things ever simple for Sasha Waybright?

"Grime! On your left!"

"On it!" the toad snarled, swinging Barrel's Warhammer in a wide arc and taking out the two frobots that had pulled even with them. Joe Sparrow squawked in annoyance as he fluttered to accommodate the sudden shift in weight.

Sasha gripped a handful of Joe's feathers and steered him into a sharp dive, a stray laser blast narrowly missing her head. She tightened her grip around the motionless body that lay against her chest.

Marcy hadn't moved since the moment they cut the cord tethering her mind to that… ***thing***. Even in the midst of the chaos following their escape, Sasha still found her fingers creeping down to lay against Marcy's wrist, feeling to reassure herself of the thready pulse there. Sasha's heavy cloak lay over Marcy like a shroud, dark wisps of fur brushing her face as the wind whipped around them.

"How many have we got left, Grimesy?" she called over the wind.

"About twelve more on our back!"

"Well can't you do something about them?"

"I'm ***trying***, if you would just let me concentrate—" their balance shifted precariously as the warhammer caved in the head of an approaching frobot. It plummeted out of the sky, leaving a comet-trail of smoke as it fell. "Make that eleven!" he yelled, obviously pleased with himself.

Another laser shot past them, singeing the green plume on the bird's helmet. Sasha gritted her teeth, willing Joe to fly faster.

She hazarded a glance behind them and cursed under her breath when she saw how fast their pursuers were gaining. For a split second she weighed their options. "Hey Grime, hold onto something!" she yelled, shifting Marcy's weight closer to her body and leaning forward in the saddle.

"What are you do—whoa, WHOA—" the toad was cut off mid-sentence as Sasha pulled the bird into a sudden climb. He caught the back of the saddle just as they began to arc backwards, his claws carving deep grooves in the wood. Sasha, Grime, and Joe Sparrow all screamed as they dove directly through the center of the group of pursuing frobots.

Their sudden change in direction had the intended effect. The frobot soldiers shot haphazardly at their quarry, but only managed to catch their own in the crossfire. One by one they sputtered and stopped, dropping out of the sky like wounded birds. The few that were left scanned the surroundings in confusion, only for their sensors to suddenly fill with the face of Barrel's Warhammer before going dark.

With the last frobot down, Joe Sparrow fluttered and settled into a gentle glide. Grime tromped up to the front where Sasha sat cradling Marcy and fell, exhausted, into the seat.

"I am never flying with you again," he grumbled.

Sasha tried not to chuckle as the poor toad's complexion turned a deeper shade of green.

XXX

The sun was rising by the time the ruins of Wartwood came into view over the horizon. Marcy still hadn't stirred in Sasha's arms, her soft, shallow breathing the only indication she had survived whatever hell Andrias and the Core had put her through. As Joe Sparrow touched down, a small knot of resistance frogs began to form in front of the Plantar home, a collective murmur arising when Sasha gingerly stepped down off the bird's back, still cradling Marcy's motionless body.

Word spread quickly around the resistance, and by the time Sasha had reached the threshold of the caverns Felicia Sundew was already waiting with two other medic frogs and a stretcher for Sasha to reluctantly hand Marcy over. She watched as they carted her off to the makeshift infirmary, still wrapped in Sasha's fur cloak.

Sasha's body moved independently of her mind, shuffling almost automatically through the catacombs of New Wartwood until she found herself in front of the heavy curtain that partitioned the sickroom away from the rest of the resistance base. She settled on the ground across from it and leaned her head against the hard-packed earth behind her. The exhaustion of an adrenaline-fueled night mission hit her suddenly with an almost tangible weight on her shoulders. She closed her eyes.

Identical hallways stretching in endless mazes, walls dripping blood-red with the emblem of a tyrant's crown.

Sasha squeezed her eyes tighter, trying to stop the memory from playing out.

They find their way to the main hall and Grime signals to halt. She freezes, swords at the ready, listening for the tiniest sound. There's a dark brown stain near the foot of the throne that was ever so briefly hers.

A mechanical hiss is the only warning they get. Thick segmented cables snake out of the shadows and lunge towards them. Wires wrap around her ankles and pin her arms to her sides; a fly caught in a steel spider's web.

And Marcy is there. But she isn't. The voice is hers, the body is hers, but the way she moves—the edge of malice in her voice… when she laughs, it sounds like metal grinding against stone.

It calls itself the Core.

Red creeps into her vision at the way it talks about Marcy. A vessel, it calls her. Called to a higher purpose and given greater meaning. Rebirth, it says.

It almost isn't fast enough to dodge Sasha's sword when she finishes sawing herself free with the dagger hidden in her gauntlet.

The air is thick with blood and steel and sweat and fire. Twin blades strike, parried by a blazing crescent moon. It pushes her back, deftly blocking calculated blows with the skill of thousands of years.

But Sasha Waybright is stubborn.

Grime comes from behind and is quickly stopped by the Core's writhing mass of cables. But the brief moment of distraction is all she needs. One hundred minds are pulled away for a split second, and she lunges.

A single moment is all it takes. The pink blade stained green slices effortlessly through wire and steel. Orange sparks arc between the severed halves of the cord.

It screams like Marcy.

The helmet falls, and she crushes it with her boot. Marcy lays still, too still, on the marble floor. It's sickeningly familiar. Is she breathing? Sasha can't tell. Marcy is lying lifeless on the palace floor. Marcy might be dead again and it's her fault—

"Commander?"

Sasha jolted upright, senses tuned to high alert. Felicia was standing over her with a slight look of worry etched into her features.

“How is she?” Sasha asked breathlessly, rising from her uncomfortable position on the ground and brushing clumps of dirt from the back of her skirt.

Felicia’s mouth tightened. “Well, she’s alive, and she’s stable,” she began, choosing her words carefully. “She has some… scars. Wounds that would normally be life-threatening, but it seems they’ve healed almost completely with no discernible internal damage.”

The implications weren’t lost on Sasha. Marcy shouldn’t have survived the throne room. She was only alive because of whatever Andrias had done after he killed her.

“But there’s no telling when she’ll wake up,” the yellow frog continued haltingly. The unspoken ***if*** hung heavy in the room. “I’m sorry, I wish there was more I could do—”

“It’s fine,” Sasha cut in, before softening her tone. “You did all that you could. All that’s left is to wait.”

Felicia nodded solemnly.

Sasha couldn’t tell whether the sigh she let out was from relief or exhaustion. “Can I see her now?” she asked, trying to keep the desperate whine out of her voice.

“Of course.” Felicia pulled aside the curtain to the small room and waited for Sasha to step inside before letting it fall back over the entrance.

Marcy was laid out on the cots they had fashioned as makeshift hospital beds. They were much too small for a human to fit comfortably, so the frogs had placed a few of them end to end. She seemed impossibly small as she lay unmoving, the sickly grey of her skin accentuated by faint branching scars that crept from her neck past her collarbone and a thin line of red where the helmet had rested on her face. The core’s armor had been removed and replaced with a threadbare and ill-fitting tunic, revealing the bandages the medic frogs had wrapped down the length of both her arms. Sasha’s mind began providing unhelpful images of what injuries might lie beneath them. A thin blanket, one of the few they could spare, was pulled up over her chest.

“Oh!” Felicia scurried back into the room suddenly, making Sasha jump. “Before I forget—” she rummaged around and pulled out a neat bundle that Sasha took a moment to recognize as her cloak. She resisted the urge to bury her face in it and see if it carried any remnant of Marcy beyond the scent of onyx-sleek armor and rotten oranges. “You might want to wash that every once in a while, dear,” the frog suggested gently.

Sasha only responded with a curt nod before turning back to the cot.

XXX

She rarely left Marcy’s side.

When Sasha wasn’t on urgent business as commander of the resistance, she was posted like a sentinel in a chair she’d dragged over from the war room. She took her meals there if she ate at all, and slept there on the rare occasions that she slept.

Hours crept by, and then days. Marcy showed no sign of improvement, her shallow breathing the only thing indicating she was even still alive. Sasha watched over her obsessively, waiting for the slightest change that never manifested.

A week passed with no progress. Or at least she thought it was a week. Time was harder to keep track of in the tunnels, and it didn’t help that she’d barely slept. Exhaustion was beginning to take its toll on her. She snapped at Felicia when she came in to check on Marcy or change her bandages. Her vision was bleary and there was a constant pounding at the back of her skull.

The only one brave enough to tell her to rest was Grime, and even he had no luck convincing her. She stubbornly kept her watch.

But even Sasha Waybright was mortal.

After a stretch of nearly three days without rest, she was frustrated to find her head nodding. She could barely remember what she was doing or why she was there, only that she needed to watch Marcy.

Five minutes. She reasoned, letting herself lean back in the chair. ***I’ll close my eyes for five minutes.***

XXX

Sasha’s eyes snapped open. The lights had been turned out, and she wondered how long she had been asleep. Marcy lay where she always did, stiff and stock-still. The mushroom on the wall cast a dancing orange glow over the surface of her sleek black armor. Her eyes were open.

Marcy, Sasha tried to say, but her throat constricted around the word.

“...You know it’s your fault,” Marcy spoke with perfect clarity, but the voice wasn’t her own. It was garbled and strangely pitched, like a recording of a recording.

All Sasha could do was sit in muted terror.

Marcy's head slowly turned to face her with glossy, lifeless eyes. "You could have saved her. If you were fast enough. If you were strong enough."

"No," Sasha stammered. Her voice came out like she was underwater.

"You could have saved her earlier, too." Marcy's eyes closed. "Maybe if you were better to her, she wouldn't have done any of this. Maybe if you ***listened***." When her eyes opened, they glowed sickly orange.

The thing wearing Marcy's face sat up in the cot, bedsheets tangled over its ghostly frame.

Sasha watched, horrified, as the gash running down Marcy's chest opened, revealing a bloodshot orange eye. The scars littering her skin all opened in turn. Each eye bored into Sasha's skull, burning her from the inside out.

She stumbled back, unable to escape the piercing stares from all directions. The scar across her cheek split open, oozing orange as it turned its gaze on her.

"You're weak," a hundred voices said in chorus.

Marcy lunged, wrapping her claws around Sasha's throat.

Sasha's eyes snapped open.

Cold sweat trickled down the back of her neck as she brushed the phantom ache where the nightmare had touched her. She glanced at Marcy, who didn't move aside from the gentle rise and fall of her chest. A blanket had been wrapped around Sasha's shoulders.

With a steadying breath, she settled back into her chair and continued her nightly vigil.

XXX

The next morning was when Marcy first stirred.

"..." a faint whisper carried across the room. Sasha sat at rapt attention, so much time passing in silence that she could almost convince herself she had imagined it.

"...Anne? Sa… shy?" Marcy's eyes cracked open, blinking rapidly as if even the dim mushroom light was too bright after whatever darkness she'd been imprisoned in.

"Yeah Mars, I'm here." Sasha scrambled to the bedside, gently grasping one of Marcy's frigid hands between her own. "It's me, it's—it's Sashy," she choked. She felt like a ghost, the way Marcy's unfocused eyes gazed past her.

Marcy's hand left Sasha's and slowly found its way to the commander's face, a marble-cold finger tracing the thin scar across her cheek. For a brief moment her eyes lit up with recognition.

"...S'really you…" she mumbled, lips parting in a hazy half-smile. Sasha barely had time to process what she meant before Marcy's eyes fluttered closed again and her breathing became steady and shallow.

Sasha stood, mouth agape, as she traced the path Marcy's fingers had followed with her own before turning on her heels to go find Felicia.

XXX

Over the next few days Marcy slipped in and out of consciousness. Sasha monitored her condition almost religiously, often being the first one to alert the medic frogs to any change. Marcy was seldom anywhere near lucid when she was awake, mostly slurring strings of nonsense words together through a loopy smile. Sometimes she asked where she was or what she was doing there. She didn't seem to quite understand the answers.

It took almost three days after her initial awakening for Marcy to recover any hint of awareness. Sasha was perched on her usual chair in the infirmary, choking down a strip of beetle jerky while she skimmed a book on ancient toad battle strategies she'd found in the tunnels. She was so absorbed in her work that she failed to notice the soft rustling coming from the cot.

"H'llo…?" Marcy's barely-audible voice was enough to send Sasha sprinting to her bedside.

"Hey Mar-Mar," Sasha answered gently. "Can I get you anything?"

Marcy squinted at her with a puzzled look. "…Sasha?" she said, almost hesitantly.

"Yeah, it's Sasha." She was out of the habit of smiling, but she tried her best to flash a nonthreatening one.

Without warning Marcy began scrambling backwards, sending herself toppling out of the cot. "Wait, no, I'm not—" she stammered, her breath quickening. "You shouldn't—"

"Marcy, what's wrong?" Sasha knew she was doing a poor job of masking the panic in her voice.

Marcy was now trying to use the makeshift bed to stand, but her trembling legs collapsed as Sasha approached.

“Please, wait—no—” she pleaded, curling up into a ball on the floor. “I can’t—” Sasha felt a cold hand on her shoulder and turned to see Felicia and her medic team.

“We’ll take it from here, honey,” the yellow frog said gently.

Sasha let herself be led out of the infirmary, still dazed. She sat dumbly staring at the curtain covering the entrance, feeling confused and helpless.

“Commander.”

Grime’s voice shocked her into the present.

“Y-yeah?” she said quickly, trying to shake herself out of her fog.

The toad gave her a worried glance, but didn’t comment. “Miss Sundew tells me your friend Marsha is doing better.”

Sasha nodded. She didn’t have the energy to correct him on Marcy’s name.

“I know this has been difficult for you,” he said, as tactfully as a toad could manage. “But now that she’s out of danger I think it’s time you start returning to your duties.”

She fixed him with a cold stare, but he didn’t back down. “Are you giving me an order, captain?” she challenged. “You know I outrank you here.”

“Yes, and that’s why we need you on the battlefield,” he said. “These frogs need someone to rally behind. Without your leadership they’re going to fall apart.”

It was hard for her to admit, but Grime was right. She knew firsthand how drastically morale could affect the outcome of a battle.

“...I don’t want to leave her,” she admitted finally, feeling small and pathetic.

“I know, tadpole,” Grime said softly, his rough arms wrapping her in a hug. She returned it gratefully and let out a few shuddering sobs, hoping no one else could see.

XXX

The things Grime tasked her with at first weren’t big or dangerous, but they did keep her busy. Supply runs, recruitment tours, training drills… she was glad for the distraction, even if she wouldn’t admit it.

By the time she returned from her first mission, Marcy had already been discharged from the med bay. Sasha learned from Grime that from the moment she was cleared to leave she’d been doing everything she could to help the resistance, using intel from her time inside the Core to help plan strategies and raids.

Apparently, she was so busy that she couldn’t even spare Sasha a glance.

Whenever Sasha saw her, Marcy was bustling around New Wartwood like a worker bee. Despite being on crutches, she moved surprisingly fast whenever she spotted Sasha.

If she wasn’t already gone by the time Sasha said hello, it was “Sorry, can’t talk right now!” or “They actually need me in a strategy meeting” or “Wow would you look at the time!”

It was disheartening, to say the least.

XXX

She found Marcy one day in the war room. She was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she didn’t notice the dark-haired girl hunched over the table until they were practically on top of each other.

Marcy yelped, startled by Sasha’s intrusion. She scrambled to gather the maps she’d been poring over and hastily stood up.

“No, wait—” Sasha interjected, causing Marcy to pause, wide-eyed. “Please, stay.”

Marcy sat back down, eyes darting nervously around the room, looking anywhere but in Sasha’s direction. Sasha tried to look as nonchalant as possible as she pulled up the schematics of the next factory they intended to hit.

They both worked in a dead silence that was punctuated by occasional shuffling and awkward coughs. Sasha fiddled with the pencil in her hand, unable to focus on the blueprints in front of her. She glanced around the room, eyes landing on the pair of crutches leaning against Marcy’s chair.

“They’re nice,” she blurted, feeling her cheeks heat up as Marcy looked at her confusedly. “Your crutches, I mean.”

“Oh,” Marcy said. “Thanks.”

They lapsed into silence again as Sasha desperately tried to think of a followup.

“Where did you, um—” she finally said.

“Loggle made them.” Marcy responded quickly. They both kept their eyes steady on the papers in front of them, although neither was working.

“They’re… nice.” Sasha said lamely, kicking herself for such a stupid compliment. “He’s pretty good at that.”

“Yeah that’s—that’s probably why it’s his job.”

“Right.”

Another awkward silence fell over them. Sasha watched the progress of a small insect as it crawled across the far wall. A few months ago she would have been horrified that she was considering whether it was worth catching as a snack.

She glanced at Marcy, who was still dutifully noting strategic areas of interest on a map of eastern Amphibia. Sasha turned back to her own papers, poorly pretending to be busy while she tried to work up the nerve to say what was on her mind.

“Marcy, I—” by the time she looked up, Marcy was already out the door.

XXX

Marcy peeked into the infirmary, confused to find it empty.

“Miss Sundew? You said you wanted to see—”

“Marcy.”

She jumped, surprised to find Sasha standing by the doorway.

“Whoopsguessshe’snotherei’llcomebackanotherdaybye—” Marcy squeaked, turning to run before a heavy hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“I just want to talk,” Sasha said firmly. “***Please***,” she added.

Reluctantly, Marcy sat down on one of the frog-sized cots. Sasha sat next to her a few inches away.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” A statement, not a question.

A moment’s hesitation. Marcy nodded.

“Why?”

Marcy took a shuddering breath. “I thought you were mad at me. You ***should*** be mad at me,” she murmured. “I can’t understand why you aren’t.”

“I ***am*** mad at you,” Sasha said, trying to keep her voice even. “Or I was—I don’t know. You took us away from our lives, Mars. You took Anne away from her family.”

“I’m sorry,” Marcy’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“I know.”

Marcy finally met Sasha’s gaze, her eyes red and swollen.

“For the longest time I wanted to believe that you weren’t,” Sasha said slowly, “I wanted to think that you did this, that you ***hurt us***, because it was all part of some thought-out plan. Because it made it easier to be angry. It was easier to hate you if you were some manipulative mastermind who knew all about the box and brought us to a crazy frog dimension for your own selfish pleasure. It was… easier not to miss you.

“Because you ***died***, Marcy.” Sasha was crying now too. Tears rolled down her cheeks as her voice trembled. “You died, and I think I couldn’t bear the thought of losing someone I still cared about. So I made up a version of you that did everything on purpose, because I couldn’t stand to grieve someone who made a few stupid mistakes.

“And then—” she paused to take a few shuddering breaths. “And then you died again, and I thought I was the one that killed you.”

Marcy’s eyes widened, but she said nothing.

“When I cut that cord, when I killed that thing that was in the helmet, I—I thought I killed you with it,” Sasha sobbed. “And I was ***terrified***. I thought I lost you again and it was my fault.”

“But I don’t—why would you ***care***?” Marcy asked, incredulous. “After everything I did, after what I put you and Anne through—put all of ***Amphibia*** through—why would you still—”

“Because I love you, Marcy Wu!”

They looked at each other, both frightened and confused and a little embarrassed. Sasha hadn’t meant to yell, but she couldn’t back down now.

“I love you,” she said again. “And I forgive you.” She hesitantly scooted closer and wrapped an arm around Marcy’s shoulder. Marcy didn’t back away.

“You shouldn’t,” Marcy whispered, not meeting her eyes.

“But I do,” Sasha replied with conviction. “I love you, Marcy. I think I’ve always loved you. We’ve both made mistakes, but I want to be better for you. I want to be ***with*** you. But you have to let me.”

Marcy sniffled, breaking into a watery smile.

“I love you too, Sash,” she said finally.

Sasha gently placed a finger under Marcy’s chin and lifted it up until their eyes met. She glanced at Marcy’s lips, an unspoken question passing between them. Marcy nodded and leaned toward her.

And for one blissful moment, there was no war. There was no Andrias, no Core. No resistance and no armies. There was just Marcy, and Sasha, and the white-hot point where their lips touched. Sasha cupped Marcy’s face gently, pulling her closer.

“A-hem.”

They pulled apart, flustered to see Grime standing in the doorway.

“Am I interrupting something?” he said flatly.

“No! No—” they said together, clumsily trying to untangle themselves.

He chuckled, turning to leave. “Strategy meeting in ten minutes, don’t make me come get you again.”

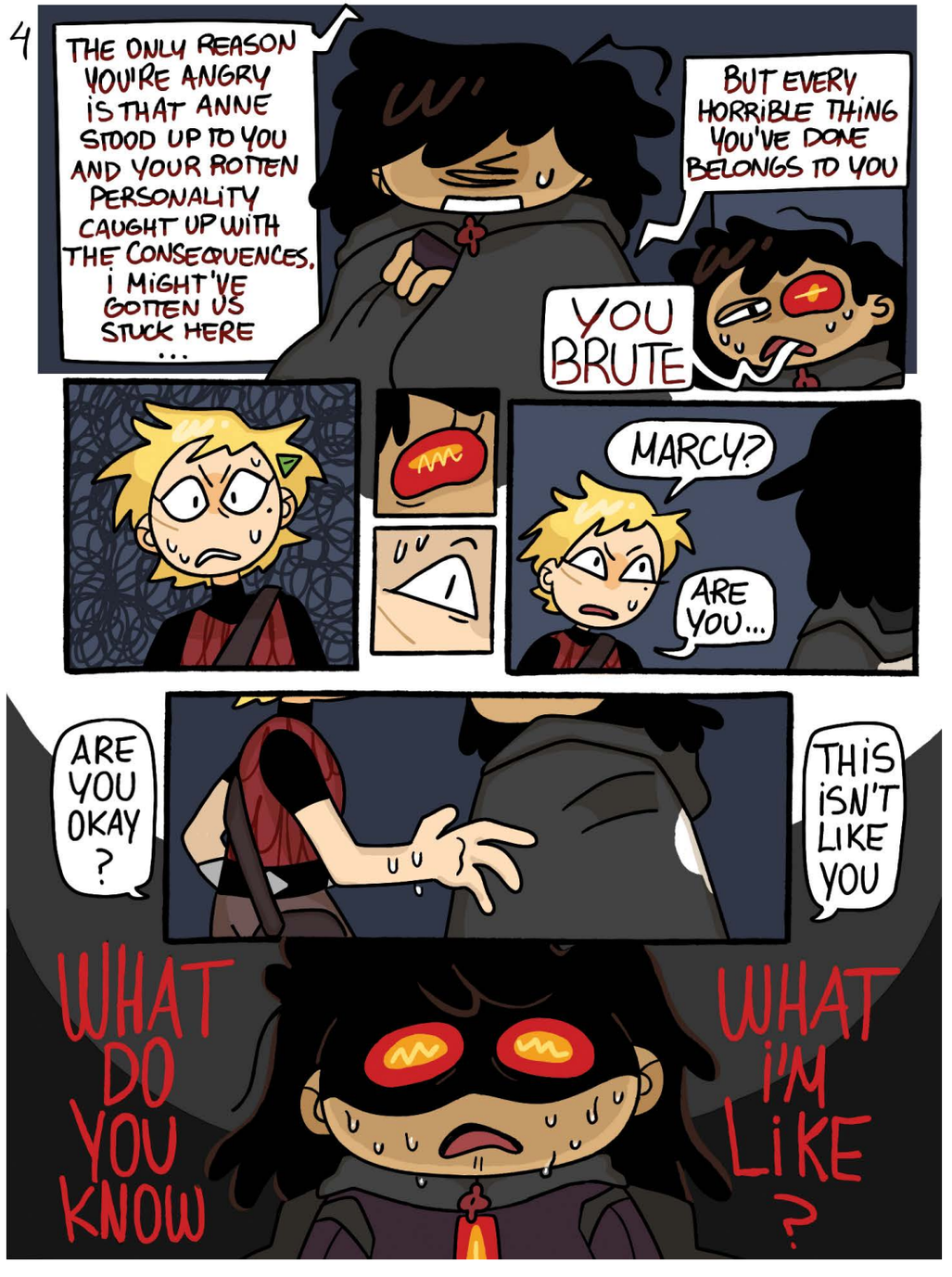
They smiled bashfully at each other once he was out of the room before leaning in for another kiss.

They weren’t okay. They were messy and broken and scared and fighting a war that wasn’t theirs. But as their lips met in the infirmary of a ramshackle resistance base, they thought maybe they could figure it out together.

1

2
STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT
...like what?
oh sashy thank you for the shots
oh sashy thank you for lending me your cape
LIKE THAT.
i KNOW YOU'RE TRYING TO ACT CUTE TO GET ME TO FORGET WHAT YOU DID
"ACT CUTE?"
BUT LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING MARCY

DON'T EXPECT ME TO FEEL ALL SORRY THAT YOU GOT YOURSELF KILLED
i'M NOT ANNE
(GOD KNOWS WHERE YOU EVEN SENT HER)
mm
SO ACT PATHETIC ALL YOU WANT. i WONT-
HOW CAN YOU CALL ANYONE PATHETIC WITH THAT HAIRCUT
WHAT DID YOU SAY
i SAID YOU'RE PATHETIC


4
THE ONLY REASON YOU'RE ANGRY IS THAT ANNE STOOD UP TO YOU AND YOUR ROTTEN PERSONALITY CAUGHT UP WITH THE CONSEQUENCES. i MIGHT'VE GOTTEN US STUCK HERE ...
BUT EVERY HORRIBLE THING YOU'VE DONE BELONGS TO YOU
YOU BRUTE
MARCY?
ARE YOU...
ARE YOU OKAY ?
THIS ISN'T LIKE YOU
WHAT DO YOU KNOW
WHAT i'M LIKE ?

51

Burn at Close of Day

Written by Blair
Spot Art by Oly

Summary

When Sasha is critically injured too after Andrias' betrayal, she and Marcy are trapped together in a nightmare that seems inescapable.

Flavour of Sasharcy

Alternate Universe, Amphibia

Sasha said she'd hold Andrias off while Anne and Marcy opened the portal, and she did.

Just… not as long as she thought she could.

Red-spark pain fireworked across her eyes, her head, her neck, her back, and something cracked loud enough that she heard it through the ringing in her ears and the nerve-wails of pain she couldn't ignore, couldn't push or move or ***think*** through.

Stone, or bone?

She couldn't tell.

"Marcy!" Anne's distraught voice cut through the air and Sasha's own pain-blindness.

She fluttered her eyes open, gravel-stung fingertips curling into fists, and saw-

Grime, blocking her sight as he knelt before her. "Sasha, we have to ***go***."

"***Hn***. Marcy?" More whispers than words- talking hurt, radiating down from her skull and up from the neck she couldn't feel anything below.

"I'm sorry, but the king- your friend didn't make it. Listen, we don't have time-"

Night-cold iron weighed leaden in her gut, Sasha focused past Grime, past the high-pitched ringing in her head. ***Marcy… she was…***

"G-go then. Get out of here."

"What the- ***No***, absolutely not, now come on, let me get you-"

"'M already dead, Grime." ***In more ways than one***. Part of her was already going cold, sprawled across polished flint tiles with an arm outstretched to the portal's afterimage. "Battlefield rules. Neck's broken. This's… is my last request."

Sasha almost thought he would refuse. But he rested a wart-calloused palm on her head, claws scritching gently at her scalp in a way that made her want to cry even ***more***. "... I'm going to come back and kill him for you. I ***promise***."

Blinking away weird snotty toad tears, Grime vanished off- somewhere. She hoped he made it out.

All that remained was the haunt-heavy silence of a finished battle, disturbed by the blurred words of Andrias and the two newts still in the throne room.

Armored boots struck the stone next to Sasha, depriving her of what ***should*** be a drifting end. "You're certain you want this one too? … So be it. Yunan, you take this one down to the tank. I'll take care of Marcy."

Sasha blinked, glimpsing rattling gauntlets and a harrowed pink face looking back at her.

And then she didn't blink again.

XXX

Sasha stumbled out of the weird nightmare room with only one vinegar-sticky hand on Yunan's shoulder; the general and Lady Olivia offered themselves as crutches, but Sasha stubbornly declined. Marcy needed the help more, because whatever that weird tank juice did to revive them… Sasha just broke her neck. Marcy's entire ***torso***, from neck to navel, inside and outside, spine to sternum, plasma-hollowed into a crematorium for her own stomach, lungs, heart-

We died. I died. She died, she died for real, she-

Sasha choked back bile, but refused to lean even more on Yunan- the less these newts touched her, the better. The weird metal circles embedded in her limbs and spine ***ached***, especially after Yunan got impatient trying to untangle the tubes that knotted so tightly together none of them could tell if they attached to Marcy's or Sasha's black-paneled suit.

Just cutting through the knot was for the best, though, even if it tugged painfully underneath Sasha's skin and ***had*** to be just as unpleasant for Marcy. They wouldn't have been able to destroy those hologram projectors when they were tied together by a rat king's tail of wires and weird tubes that had still been pumping ***something*** into their systems.

The holograms… Sasha shivered, and ***not*** because her still-wet hair allowed the basement's chill to sink even deeper into her bones. At first they'd seemed real, ***far*** too real- the only reason Sasha's coma-soaked mind realized otherwise was because she'd heard the real Marcy, ***her*** Marcy's, mirror-soft sobbing over the hologram's cold declaration that Sasha's two most important people were ***done*** being friends with her.

Marcy's own monstrous projection proved that this whole nightmare was fake, because no matter how pissed Sasha got, she couldn't imagine wanting nothing to do with one of her deepest, heart-guarded friends.

And no matter how angry she was, Sasha thought she could forgive Marcy for the box thing, eventually. Because her worst fear was also ***Sasha's*** worst fear, the living nightmare of losing each other becoming a reality because of ***both*** of their own mistakes. So-

Blue swelled out of the cave and knocked the four escapees back like plastic toy soldiers.

Crud, Andrias, get up, get up, ***come on,*** Sasha chanted to herself, clumsily grasping Marcy's hand in her own as she struggled to sit them both up.

Because holding her hand was all Sasha could do, during Andrias's pompously royal monologue about- ***about-***

A host.

Sasha met Marcy's bone-blanched expression of fear before that unsleeping unnatural thing deigned to move. Before it grabbed Marcy by the face, tearing her away from Sasha's grip so fast that her overgrown nails left scratches in Sasha's palm.

Sasha lunged after them, teeth bared, only to be snatched from the floor by a cold blue fist.

"Hey, let me ***go***!" she snarled, arms uselessly pinned and tender neck aching from the whiplash.

Sasha was a helpless bystander to a horror show; a wire-tailed chair and Marcy thrashing in restraints like a trapped animal, curtained by wild blonde hair framing Sasha's view.

The helmet descended, inevitable as a guillotine, and Marcy ***screamed***.

Mindless with panic and the fear-splintered thought that her friend was dying ***again***, Sasha thrashed in Andrias's grip, kicking her feet and sinking her teeth into a blue-fleshed finger.

"Enough of that," Andrias hissed in pain, squeezing Sasha harder as he approached Marcy's slumped body.

That body heaved itself up, neck popping and tubes shifting. "Well, hello there." Marcy- ***the Core***- twitched a blood-crusted finger, and the tubes unlatched to fall away behind the throne, and the cuffs popped open.

Sliding to the ground and wobbling down the dias steps like a newborn fawn. "Heh, oh, this is a bit weird…" it muttered to itself, inspecting the red half-moons on Marcy's palm where she'd clenched them into voltage-seizing fists. Clapped those palms together, heedless of the tiny injuries. "Right then! Your turn!"

The hairs on Sasha's neck rose. "... What?"

"You think we wouldn't make use of a Calamity vessel that fell right into our lap? Not just anyone can host us without their brains dribbling out of their ears, so why waste it?"

No. No, no, no, please-

Sasha struggled. She thrashed against the chair's restraints the moment she was shoved into it, tried to pull away from the cables plugging themselves into the ports in her spine and limbs. She knew it was useless, but she still ***refused*** to give up, even as the second helm lowered.

Trembling, her eyes clouded with tears because she'd never been so scared in her short fifteen years of life, her voice shaking, Sasha looked directly at Andrias- not Marcy, she hated the thing who hurt her, ***was*** hurting her right now, too, but she couldn't say this to Marcy's face- and promised, "I'm going to kill you."

Pain whited out her vision, jaw clenched shut and blood sizzling in her mouth from her bitten tongue, lightning shrieking under her skin, behind her eyes, inside her ***skull***-

Sasha fell away from her own body.

XXX

Marcy's self-awareness came back to her in nerve-hot green sparks, like that strange velcro-pull sensation in the Wit Temple outhouse in reverse.

And she could feel, sort of, in the same way someone waking up from sleep paralysis could- a sensation, but no movement. But it was sense-feedback from something utterly alien, vast spiderwebs of dusty code that had only been self-maintained for over a thousand years-

Oh. This is the Core.

Those cobwebs clinging to Marcy's mental fingertips let her feel the Core's framework, an operating system built on Wit energy, but she couldn't ***do*** anything- the thousand eyes paid her no mind, she couldn't control her body, her real body, not when the Core shut her in some forgotten corner of the hivemind like some howling animal stuffed into a crate-

Marcy snapped open her eyes, choking on the sensation of dying, not-dying, some lightless limbo in between. This void-prison was just her brain's interpretation of something that had no true appearance, because this thing stole everything, from Marcy's autonomy to her body to the wild-winged Wit that seethed within her like a trapped hurricane's breaths.

It had Sasha ***too***, the echo of her friend's screams and live-wire agony from the upload haunting Marcy…

Wait. The echo, horrific as a ghost's last screams- Marcy felt them. Just like she still felt the Core's Wit-borne code at her nerve-tips, like static sparks seeking a grounding point. More importantly, the Core wasn't watching her, content to shut her out of the hivemind network and leave her to her own imprisoned devices.

The Core was a hivemind, and both Marcy and Sasha were ***in it***.

I can find her!

Even with most of her power drained, Marcy ***knew*** what Calamity's Might felt like, knew how to track it like a volcanic magma-artery down to the molten heart of the planet, how to desperately grasp that vein like a lifeline-

Fleecy void tore, and Marcy crashed into Sasha's open arms.

"You're alive, you're- I'm so ***sorry!***" Marcy wailed into her friend's chest.

Blunt fingers clawed at her back, hard enough that even through her school hoodie- her self-projection was wearing her ***school uniform***, the girls' one she'd had to fight to wear after over a ***year*** of borrowing her friends' pleated skirts- Marcy winced at the pain raking over her scar.

Marcy tried to pull away, eyes burning, because if Sasha was ***that*** mad, she probably didn't want the girl who got her killed and then ***possessed*** throwing a sobbing pity party all over her shirt, but froze when Sasha started trembling like a fawn in winter.

"I was so- scared." Sasha wrapped herself around Marcy like a drowning girl, like every breath Marcy's repaired lungs took was a miracle. "You- he ***killed*** you, and then I thought after the Core- you're alive. You're alive, I'm so sorry, I couldn't- you're ***alive***."

"So are ***you***," Marcy whispered.

Overwhelmed and utterly exhausted, Marcy pressed her face into her friend's neck, into the reassuring war-drum beat of her pulse. Sasha's legs tangled with hers, twining her hand in Marcy's and squeezing like she was the last hold over an abyss.

They simply… held each other, rafts in a weightless black ocean of the Core's abandoned corners.

But even rafts sank, and Marcy had no intention of drowning.

"Sasha, listen, I- It'll take a long time, but I think we can get out." Marcy cupped her shaking hand over Sasha's cheek, pulling her closer to press their foreheads against each other- summer-gentle, her fingertips resting over the death-wound of Sasha's previously broken neck.

She nudged for her green understanding to overtake Sasha's war-pink willpower, asking permission to touch her part of the shared consciousness directly. The Core might be paying them no mind, but it was better to keep their future escape plans shadowed in the safety of their own void-limbo.

Understanding of the Core's goals, its strength, its pride, the very way it ***thought*** bloomed like a storm in Sasha's mind, the part the helmet welded into a tuning fork for a hivemind- a hivemind Marcy was technically inside, whose observation she could redirect with the Calamity magic the Core's code was built from.

Terrifying as it was to know that sensing threads of the Core's intent and movements within the unified consciousness meant that Marcy was partially assimilated herself, it was ***necessary***. If Marcy wanted to save her friends from dying- ***again***, she thought, guilt-damp, because Andrias broke Sasha's neck before he killed Marcy- she ***refused*** to let go of whatever puppet-wires she snatched back from the Core.

"Hey, don't worry about that, I got you," Sasha murmured past her own dying sniffles, resting her hand over Marcy's own so that a chilled palm stayed pressed between her scarred cheek and sword-callused fingers. "I ***got*** you, and now that I have you again, I'm not letting you go, dummy."

XXX

The Core strolled through the burning rebel cell's camp in the wake of their wholly unnecessary honor guard of bots, spinning their plasma blade in nimble fingers.

Unlike Marcy, the Core's Voice who remained ensconced in the castle's throne room, Sasha, as the Core's Hand, was something of a poet, grasping a knife like a pen and scribing songs on the ground as blood-splatters on a battlefield.

Like any satisfied composer, the Core hummed in tune with the forge-bright chorale of burning resistance bases. Quite a novel experience, really, and another reason to keep this host; to the ears of the vessel of Calamity's Might, fire- a mere shade of Amphibia's burning iron core- did not burn, nor crackle or spit or choke with smoke. It ***sang***.

Merciless stars above, the very ***planet***, from the magnetic core to the liquid fire-marrow of its mantle to the skin of its crust and jagged mountain fangs, bent towards this host like sunflowers to dawn. And the vapid creature hadn't even ***realized*** it.

And though much of Calamity's Might was frustratingly inaccessible to them before fully assimilating Marcy and Sasha, lighting wildfires to flush out these swamp-squatting rebels had never been so ***fun***.

Ah, there they are. The Core waved their hand, and the ravenous flames circling the remaining rebels parted with operatic flourish.

... Heart's Vessel was ***here***, smokestained and baring blunt teeth and a glowing blue blade.

"Well, well, ***well***, looks like someone had fun with their backwater planet's toys." The deep, staticky hum of the Core's voice hid cobwebs of apprehension- the Box was here, so how had Anne even ***made*** a portal with Earth's primitive technology?

"What the he- Sasha?"

"Eh, not yet, but she'll be joining us soon," the Core purred, flipping their unbound lion's mane over their shoulder; cropping what was now ***their*** hair would be more practical, but vanity ***was*** befitting of monarchs. "And maybe, if you're lucky, so will ***you***."

The Core lunged, flames bowing before them like wheat to a storm, like mortals to a god.

The host's old mentor wasted less time in fish-gaping shock than Anne did, meeting one of the Core's blades with that old hammer's rocket-boosted uppercut.

But muscle memory from hundreds of spars with this old toad spun their ***second*** sword in an upward arc that echoed its deflected twin and scythed through Grime's exposed guard.

With the sizzle-sweet smell of burning flesh, Grime's arm fell to the scorched, and so did he. Not an immediately fatal blow, but the shock might just kill him for them-

Crystal-seething pink exploded behind their eyes, behind ***all*** of their eyes- the set here, the set with the Wit-vessel at the castle, even the set from their old defunct body, even if that chassis was constructed with Calamity-powered circuitry, that should be impossible-

Blue roared in the corner of the Core's furthest eye, and they swung blindly in return.

The bone-shuddering impact of their pommel against Anne's head pulsed up their host's arm and into their brain, rattling with the high-pitched siren keen of a head injury, even though they were not the ones who sustained such an injury.

It wasn't ***Anne*** who struck them so sharply. Panting, shaking hands on their armored knees, the Core pushed the signal blockers higher, reduced the feedback from the host minds even further. ***Be silent!***

That the hosts could peer through the Core's helmet-eyes was… strange, but also of little concern. It was, after all, simply the nature of their operating system that the humans registered as just one more zooid-mind out of the thousands that used the same set of human senses. Unlike the rest of the Core's minds, the hosts had no control, and remained in quarantine where they left them. As for the other Calamity vessel…

When they looked up, Grime's body and Anne were both gone, a snail-slime trail already drying in the forest-fire heat. ***Damn***.

Knowing what The Core did from their vessels, Anne would come to them herself, soon enough. They just had to prepare for her...

XXX

Time passed… strangely, for Sasha and Marcy, as they worked. Fuzzy and distant like dentist laughing gas, barely able to sense that they weren't even halfway through chipping away at each others' signal blockers set by the Core. Though many months of code-picking yawned before them, they ***refused*** to rest.

Grime almost ***died***, he'd never be able to hold a blade in his dominant hand again, and Anne was here, within reach of the biomechanical shadow-emperor that wanted to inflict the same on her as it did on ***them***.

They never let go of each other, and never stopped holding each others' minds.

XXX

"One life for millions," Bee's daughter repeated the newt king's offer numbly, staring where the enormous projection used to be. "I don't- I can't-"

"And you don't have to," Bee reassured, his heart and voice dust-cracked.

It didn't ***matter*** that Anne held Amphibia's abyssal magic- fleeting as thunderlight, a crushing calamity sprung from the seed of the seas, whose ocean-deep power could drown a soul in layers of reality Bee couldn't even comprehend, as if his mind was protecting him from the terror of death's lake-reflected face-

None of that mattered, because she was a child, ***his*** child, his little girl who was still fawn-gangly and awkward from her high-school growth spurt.

"No, you don't get it- Not like ***that***! It's because it's ***three*** lives for millions, and I can't- how am I supposed to ***choose***?" Anne raked frustrated fingers through her leaf-peppered hair, cobweb-clingling blue sparks chasing after her hands like static. "Mom, Dad, I- we were at the castle in the first place to rescue Marcy and Sasha, so I won't- I can't fail them again but Andrias is making me ***choose***."

"Oh, Anne…" Bee murmured helplessly, pulling her into a hug that tucked her face away from the airborne castle- because what ***else*** could he even do?

Even through the impersonal barrier of his body armor and Anne's brass-bright chestplate, he felt her shuddering like a cracking glacier. From fear, or rage, or some kind of reaction to her Calamity- Bee wasn't certain.

… His daughter was more terrified for her friends' fates than she was for a duel with millions of lives weighing her shoulders like a leaden shroud.

Millions of lives, but- maybe they could take two of those weights from her.

"Hey, listen, you still don't have to choose. We can fly your…" Bee hesitated, because Domino Two was a cat the same way an aircraft carrier was a boat. "Uh, ***cat***, up to the castle and save Sasha and Marcy. We can even take those two newts and the toad as backup."

"Your father's right- you worry about yourself, we'll get the girls. ***And***-" Oum raised a commanding finger before Anne herself could even interrupt with an obvious protest. "-If things get too rough for you, don't stay there and fall. ***Run***."

"But- if that happens-"

Bee drew his mouth into a stress-thinned line- even with Calamity's Heart, with the power of an entire planet at his daughter's fingertips, he was so worried for her safety that it burned like falling stars. "We're ***serious***, young lady. Take care of yourself ***first***."

Eyes already backlit with the jellyfish-glow of fathomless blue stared directly at him. Stared through him, unmoving and steady as a heartbeat.

His daughter looked away. "... Alright." Squared her shoulders and exhaled, releasing a heart-blue fog from behind her teeth. "Okay, I will. But first we need to talk about how you can get my girls back. Because they aren't exactly, uh, ***prisoners*** in the way you're thinking…"

XXX

Sasha carefully pulled apart a puppet-string of the Core's code, wincing in subdued pain that needled across the back of her head; the longer they were stuck here, the less the Core programs felt like wires, and the more they felt like live nerves.

They were so ***close*** though- close enough, in fact, that there was just one more cable to snip, one more brainstem-bundle of nerves to sever.

Close enough that as soon as Marcy touched the blocks to their own body, the Core would ***know*** what they were doing.

Just to scout ahead- not unlike what the Core would do in her body when flushing out resistance cells- Sasha ran her mind across the mesh network connecting the Core to the crown. Plugged into the hivemind, but not ***inside*** of it.

Something blue and deep as love hummed in front of the crown's sensors. Something so frost-clinging and familiar that Sasha choked on her own voice before she could call out to Marcy. Not that she even ***needed*** to- they'd forgone verbal communication in favor of just thinking at each other. It was faster, stealther, and most vitally, more comfortable for Marcy, who found it uncomfortable to be reminded of her changing voice with every cracked word.

That's Anne. Andrias is fighting Anne***!***

This close to the duel, even from the canyon-distant perspective of the crown, Sasha and Marcy felt more than saw the unrestrained, brine-fanged ***ferocity*** of Calamity's Heart.

Just as intensely, they felt every impact, every concrete-dusted echo of pain as a skyscraper tilted across the skyline like a felled tree, like Anne collapsing before Andrias atop the helipad and ***not getting up again***.

Neither of them needed to ask the other what to do, their minds too enmeshed from existing in the Core's network. It wasn't like they would be able to hide their internal sabotage for much longer anyway.

Sasha reached out to Marcy, through the helm, down the cord, grounding into the Core's central hive-processors, snaking up the wire that plugged into the antlered mask hiding Marcy's sweet face.

The cobweb-sturdy hold the Core strung their minds with ***snapped***, sundered by weeks of sabotage and weakened by the safeguards that were a mere afterthought to prevent Sasha and Marcy from reaching for each other ***first*** rather than scrabbling for their own autonomy.

Marcy, her mental projection holding hands with Sasha as if she were physically tugging her along, guided Sasha to the metaphorical wires of the framework she'd unspooled.

And at Marcy's wordless confirmation, Sasha wound those weakened connections around her palms like tarantula reins, and ***yanked***.

The effect was flash-fire instant- her view from the crown drowned in dawn-dark orange, sparking and sputtering against even the enfeebled Might of Calamity as Sasha gave Andrias the ***nastiest***, most debilitating migraine in his thousand-year life.

Andrias won't be getting up from that any time soon. Anne was safe, so now- ***Marcy!***

Marcy's mind was wrist-deep into the visual representation of the Core's computer-guts as she tore valley-gaping wounds into firewalls, her body's fine motor controls just within reach. Marcy was ***better*** at this, wired deeper into the system than Sasha- the system constructed and powered with Wit energy, far more than the other facets of Calamity. But she still wouldn't do it alone, not while Sasha was alive to protect her.

Especially because the Core ***definitely*** knew what they were up to now, and it was furious- a howling storm that stripped the flesh from her bones and the will from her heart. The impersonally empty void imprisoning Sasha and Marcy flared with eyes like coals searing against char, orange on black on black on black-

It ***scared*** Sasha, more than her own death did- but not more than the threat to her best friend.

So Marcy took care of the technical stuff, plugging herself into the hivemind's framework with Wit and the Core's own code- deep enough to be noticed, deep enough that the Core would push ***back***.

All Sasha had to do was draw a line and hold it. And ***keep*** holding it.

It burned magma-deep, hotter than any plasma weapon. And it was ***hard*** to withstand, two colliding tectonic plates refusing to subduct.

But Sasha had gotten very, ***very*** good at last stands.

(Marcy's mental fingers left storm-swirling gouges in the Core's code, clawing herself out of its voided prison like a moth's cocoon; a second birth, a second death.)

And then, behind Sasha's caldera-rim shield, something snapped like lightning between Marcy and the Core's neural network. The eye-constellated void blazed from black to firmament-green, distant as the vault of heaven.

The Core ***shrieked***, pushed out of Sasha and Marcy's body like smog swept away by a hurricane.

Sasha-and-Marcy blinked twenty and four eyes, and saw familiar faces.

XXX

After Andrias fell to his knees, clutching his head in agony, Anne didn't wait for Mr. X's reinforcements, or even her own frog family. She took aim at Newtopia Castle, pushed yet more power into her veins that pumped more Calamity than blood by now, and ***flew***. Because the leashed-Calamity barrier still shielded Newtopia Castle in unnaturally uniform planes of light, which meant something went ***wrong***, either with her parents or her best friends.

Skim the underbelly of the castle, up through the heat-rusted rocket-vents, though the halls and sometimes through the brick walls that may as well be glass beneath Anne's power-

Oh, crud! Too fast, corners, corners, corners- Cloak-bot-!

"***Holy-!***" Anne's mother shrieked, yanking Bee away by his arm just in time to dodge Anne as she crashed into their cloak-bot attacker at terminal velocity. "Anne!"

"Did you- Are you okay? Did you find Sasha and Marcy?" Anne demanded, unable to hide the frost-fear for her loved ones in her voice as she shook out the shattered remains of a cloak-bot from her fingers.

"We haven't reached them yet- didn't expect to run into more of these guys," Oum said, lightly kicking at the mangled cloak-bot remains. "But listen, are you okay-"

Anne didn't hear the rest of her mom's feather-stifling concern, already bolting down the hall and up the ladder to the generator that barely leashed the Calamity that stretched towards Anne like creeping frost, desperate to rejoin with a living Heart-host.

But Anne didn't care about ***that***, either. Sasha and Marcy were ***in there***, bare whispers of Wit and Might grave-smothered beneath that- that unnatural, deathless thing.

The first thing Anne saw when she clawed her way through the access hatch was… the Core, but ***not***.

In Marcy and Sasha's bodies, the Core stood frozen, lethal orange sparks arcing from helmets and cables. All twenty eyes, from both helmets, fritzed from soulless static to wide, storm-terror green.

"***Cut the wires!***" the Core- not the Core?- grit out from Sasha and Marcy's mouths. Its- ***their***- voice was less of the hair-raising multivoiced legion, instead ***both*** sounding exactly like Marcy.

It's not the Core pleading with Anne- she ***knew*** this wasn't a trick, like she was somehow hearing a crystalline facet of her own soul.

Anne's blade sliced through both helmet-cables with the finality of a reaper's scythe.

Sunset-bright sparks arced around their heads, and the Core froze. Staggered, eyes static-blank instead of orange or pink or green-

Collapsed to the floor, seizing.

Anne's knees hit the tiled floor at the same time her friends' did, deaf to her parents' heavy footsteps behind her as she scrabbled her fingers across those horrible helmets, her fingers leaving dusty streaks like chalk-marks over beetle-dark armor.

Anne nearly snapped at her mother when Oum pried shaking hands and broken fingernails away from Marcy's head.

Anne whipped her head around at a clatter- her dad managed to free Sasha of the antlered helm, and thrown the wretched thing away in favor of propping the shaking girl up with whispered reassurances of, "Easy there, take it slow-"

"Some of it's still in there," Sasha rasped, still with that strange, storm-deep undertone of Marcy's voice in her words. "Let me- let me just-"

The unspoken request flickered like a Morse-coded heartbeat to Anne, blue bleeding into green and pink. She drew her best friend closer, a glacier-steady support as Sasha reached out with a charcoal-fragile arm.

Sasha rested her palm over the blank helmet-lenses, solemn as a soldier closing the eyes of the fallen. Screwed her eyes shut.

Venomous green light ran through the helmet like a current. ***Calamity*** green, Marcy's power from Sasha's hand, which would never touch Anne so long as her friends were in control of it.

Anne yanked the helmet off by the horns, tossing it away like spoiled fish so that she could grip the hands of both of her friends.

Sasha with Wit-green power, Marcy with the pink of Calamity's Might at her fingertips- it was so ***strange*** to Anne's Heart-sense, like they were muddled together, a watercolor-bleeding venn diagram of souls.

But that didn't matter, not when Anne was holding Marcy in her arms and pressing her ear into her chest just to hear her heartbeat,

Stringy blonde brushed over Anne's head, curtaining her view of Sasha pressing her lips onto Marcy's forehead, soft as a promise. Though the rest of her lay unmoving, Marcy reacted.

Weakly, Marcy tugged at Anne's shirtsleeve, a silent query that Anne answered by throwing her arms around both of her most beloved people and crushing them to her battered chestplate. Anne hugged them closer than she had anyone in her life, shaky fingers clawing at their backs as something wild and blue demanded that she hold them so tight that she fused to them, that she crawled inside their ribcages to hold their hearts.

"We made it out," Marcy murmured disbelievingly, voice sun-light and higher, almost as if the pitch of Sasha's voice bled through even without the helmet.

Even with her exhaustion and her shadowed eyes above the irritated red lines bridging her nose, Marcy's little euphoric grin felt bright as it always had been.

Anne only squeezed Sasha and Marcy tighter, if possible. "You did, I'm so glad-

"... You came back for us?" Sasha finally asked, stiff and cracked as frost-shattered stone, leaning into Anne's hold just as desperately as she was pulling away..

"Of course I did." ***In what world would she*** not***?*** "Wait, shoot- Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Head hurts. Foggy." Marcy gestured vaguely, sitting up so Sasha was wedged between them and both her shoulders occupied by their chins. "***Egh***, it's weird, I'm still kind of in our- in Sasha's head."

"Bit in yours, too," Sasha grumbled, the vibrations traveling up to her collarbone and against Anne's cheek. "But it's not that- what are they doing over there?"

As if to punctuate Sasha's demand, the echo of hydraulic levers and the buzzing of clicked buttons drew all Calamity-lit eyes away from each other, though reluctantly.

Anne traced the source of the chirping clatter. Blanched, remembering how easily her parents messed up an entire movie theater's breaker system- and how badly messing up a ***flying castle*** could go if they tried to turn it off.

"... Do you need me to carry one of you over there before they break something?"

"***Please***."

YOU'RE ALIVE!

Starryemeralds'24

It's Complicated (but we'll be okay)

Written by Arcadi
Spot Art by mood-owl

Summary

After the events of their Amphibian journey, the trio are taken to the hospital to be treated for their injuries. The problem? Sasha's struggling with sleep and turns out, so is Marcy.

Flavour of Sasharcy

Canon Divergent, Post-Amphibia

Falling: that's how it starts, they usually do.

Dreams are complicated things. Vivid, complex images birthed from apparent nothingness, incoherent stories tangled within your dormant mind whilst your body's abandoned, unprotected, uncontrolled. Sasha hadn't thought about it before – why would she? – not until lengthy nights of vigilance, warily watching for signs of attack, ambush, ***danger***.

Even now on Earth, sleep's evasive. Falling asleep? A colossal task. Remaining asleep? Impossible. Their journey might be over but the events linger like a ghostly long-lost friend stranded worlds apart. Besides, her dreams are terribly predictable these days – which isn't surprising considering… everything.

"It's only natural," the doctors had explained, and Sasha supposes they're right. Something about stress to a developing mind; she can't recall. Talking to the doctors was difficult. Her hands shook ***hard***, in fact, she couldn't stop shaking until Anne and Marcy stole her hands within theirs, calming her enough to remember her surroundings.

Frustrating… like her dreams.

Typically, they go like this: there's a tower, a girl and a fall. These are important, absolute and uncontrollable. Sure, there's differences sometimes; once, she'd almost reached safety but at the last second – like always – the floor gave out and she'd slipped, falling to her fate. It's how it is but hey, it's consistent. Consistency gives control, or a fleeting sense of it anyway, enough to ease some worries come morning.

Tonight's dream starts similarly: atop the tower. The world's miles below. Rich, haunting ***orange*** paints the universe. Time dips its brushes within ink, night blanketing the world with each wavering brushstroke. Bristles dapple ***orange*** blots as the sun sets, a golden halo peeking over the horizon. Sasha's not one to sit back and admire the view, but even she'd appreciate its beauty.

Well, in any other circumstance.

In slumber, time's against her. Silhouetting against nauseating ***orange***, Sasha's a determined ***pink*** figure refusing to blend into time's water-coloured pages. Steadfast, she hangs by a veiled paper-thin thread, dangling precariously over the edge.

Awfully, the feeling's familiar. It's never easier. Bricks break beneath boots. Earth rumbles an ebbing, guttural growl. Ground peels, crumbling underneath. The tower – ***home*** – wobbles, trembling in time's wake. Then, fate cuts strings and as preordained, the tower will fall.

"***It's over,***" a heart-locked voice will call above, high and almighty, "***you're not gonna push me around anymore.***"

Ultimately, she'll fall too. Dizzying ***orange*** will scorch the world's canvas. Everything will spin: colours, shapes, reality. She'll rise, fly, then drop unceremoniously – a falling star burning bright, wings clipped, downfallen.

What awaits… well, Grime's not around to catch her this time.

Usually, that's what happens. Now, however, that impending fate looms. Death lingers, a crooked smile atop a borrowed face, their fiery ***orange*** scythe raised, waiting patiently.

Cruel really, but have her dreams ever been kind?

Around her, air whistles loudly, screeching for unmet justice. Gusts whir, attacking all directions; Sasha hardly hears past it. Its sorrowful song wails for her inevitable demise, scratching tendrils snagging dry, chapped skin. Icy fingers tug tiring limbs, urging her towards fate. Hair thrashing wildly, her cape encases her inside a fragile cocoon, barely blocking battering winds.

For a moment, time's gentle. Tenderly, she's held by a single lifeline, but it doesn't last; dreams never do. Threads fray, stitches long since plucked – damaged from years of unseeing eyes, pseudo smiles and locked hearts: a self-fulfilled prophecy.

Above: the girl. Shaking hands clasp hers, fingers tangling her wrists, desperate, afraid, unwilling to let go. Another recognisable feeling, after all, dreams build off memories – or so she's been told – and Sasha's been here before.

Something must give eventually.

Overhead, tears drip. A heart-torn Anne, Sasha expects, with lashes wet from crying, mouth curved into a melancholic frown. Despite everything – everything Sasha surely deserves – Anne will hold on, adamant to never let her fall, but memories are made, not shaped. Still, it's a kind reminder. Once, there'd been hope for change – a wish she'd tarnished.

Dreams are complicated things though.

Unexpectedly, it changes. The world shakes, thunder roars and lightning flashes. Rain pours down, cold droplets lashing at skin. Ice spreads, numbing her limbs, freezing her to the core. At every ringing clash, menacing ***orange*** fills the painted world in horrific splendour, and when Sasha looks up, her heart stills, breath taken.

"I did it for us."

The storm's eye, ***Marcy*** stares back. It's a first, usually she resides within dreams of bloodied castle floors and spiteful, treacherous kings. The unsettling change sends chills along Sasha's spine, leaving a thrumming ache that oddly ***burns***. Heartbroken sobs carry through winds, Marcy's shoulders shaking uncontrollably. Upon every lightning flash, death paints her in its visage, an ***orange*** skull highlighting jaw and bones, her eyes hazed as rain mixes with tears. Behind, her cloak whips violently, a burnt hole in the middle, and that's when Sasha realises; her armour's blackened, ruined just like before. On her chest, there's a huge slash where ***orange*** sparks continue flickering, Sasha's heart dropping at the sight.

Marcy doesn't react. Knuckles shining white, she holds Sasha desperately, grip waning and water filling between the gaps. Bewildered, Sasha stares soundlessly, but when Marcy tries speaking, there's another loud ***snap*** of thunder. ***Orange*** lightning blinds Sasha, and as she blinks spots from her vision, an unexpected voice returns.

"Nice of you to fall for our trap."

Sasha's heart lurches. Suddenly, with a sneering cackle, sharp fingernails pierce into her wrist. With a pained shriek, her vision whites out, fire-hot agony trickling down her arm but a hand slips free. Weight unbalanced, Sasha sways dangerously, and when her sight returns, everything's the same as earlier, all but ***orange*** shining within Marcy's eyes.

"I gave you this," Marcy pleads, voice all wrong – laced with something dark, overwritten, overridden. ***Orange*** glitters in her eyes, tears freefalling. Her face twists, conflicted, brows furrowing together but she doesn't let go. Marcy would ***never*** let go. "I gave you ***everything.***"

"You're not friends," that other tormenting voice howls within winds, "not anymore."

You're wrong, Sasha would voice, but the words never come. They lodge, leaving her gasping for breath. The wind bellows louder, thunder booming in the background. Stinging pain explodes tenfold, fingers digging deeper, wrestling another tormented scream from her. Green and purple blotches bloom underneath Marcy's grip – afraid, unsure, ***dangerous***.

"I just didn't want to be alone."

You weren't alone, I should've been there.

Body shaking, Sasha strains towards Marcy with her freed hand. Wanting nothing more than to be free, to hold Marcy close, to heal what was once broken, Sasha delicately pulls at Marcy's skeleton-like fingers–

Wait, what's happening?

Still, Sasha pries carefully, watching as they peel away one by one–

Stop. Don't you dare let go of her – not again.

Yet, she continues, or rather, the dream does. With every finger pulled away, Sasha finds herself edging closer to her fate, Marcy's hold weakening, threads snapping fibre by fibre.

"I'm sorry for everything."

No, I'm sorry for everything.

Time slows. ***Orange*** flames explode from Marcy's chest and Sasha watches, heart trapped behind dream-locked words. Marcy's knees buckle as her body keels forwards, and if Sasha were fast enough, she'd catch her.

But she can't.

After all, that's how it starts, they usually do, and that's how it ends.

Marcy drops.

Sasha ***falls***.

XXX

Waking's a complicated thing too. With it, there's that liminal space between reality and surreality. A muddied plane where fantasy and awareness collide, rippling waves atop a bottomless ocean's surface. There, your body's left weighted yet weightless, mind fogged yet clearing, heart restless yet resting. It's the worst part: the relentless blind ***fear*** before realisation hits.

Sasha's no different.

With a muted gasp, she jolts awake. Veins ignited ***orange***, her mind rabbit-races, reeling from the repercussions of an immense drop. Cogs stick, churning, trying to decipher through truth and illusions as her vision blurs. It's useless. No matter how much her mind searches, the same answer remains: memories weave between the passages.

In truth, she'd almost lost Marcy forever.

At that, everything hurricanes. Shapes mix and the room spins endlessly. It's like falling again. Colours blend, discarding confusing trails of deep blues, soft yellows and calming purples. Sasha's anything but calm. Body hypervigilant, her heart thunders to a lingering vicious storm, electrified with haunting ***orange***, sparks dancing within her vision. Blinded with fear, her trembling hands fumble, searching for hands stolen from reach – mind repeatedly calling for who she'd dropped, let go, abandoned.

"I'm sorry for everything."

What's within reach now isn't Marcy, or even Anne; her fingers curl around something soft – the duvet, her addled mind supplies – thrown haphazardly during nightmare-hazed struggles, binding her legs and trapping her in place. Breath hitching, silent tears roll freely.

"Just a dream, Waybright," she recalls Grime saying once. His voice was low, gritted, face painted with the familiarity of someone who'd regularly greeted demons alike. This was during the resistance's beginning, amidst blood, ruin and war, back when she'd nothing but the stubborn belief that her girls were alright. ***"You've handled worse,"*** he'd continued, wrapping her in a hug, rubbing circles on her back as she'd cried herself hoarse, ***"and no matter what awaits us, I've got your back."***

A heavy sigh escapes her, the panic-induced storm fading into numb sorrow. Settling, her surroundings slowly piece together. The hospital room is dark, coated in midnight blue, delicate yellows seeping through the large window from street lamps outside. The air's cool as a citrusy aroma floats in – the bouquet Anne's parents brought earlier to help liven the room. Helpfully, it masks the antiseptic and bleach well acquainted within the hospital's walls. Rhythmic mechanical buzzing fills the silence, and underneath that, if Sasha focuses, there's quiet snoring from the neighbouring bed. Glimpsing over, she finds Anne fast asleep, and out of view, Marcy must be the same. Thankfully, that agent (Mr X or something) pulled some strings, ensuring the trio would stay together throughout their entire stay. Sasha doesn't think she'd have survived otherwise.

"You're not friends, not anymore."

Hastily wiping tears, Sasha's unsteady hands cover her eyes before pressing her palms heavily against them. The pressure's enough that ***blue***, ***green*** and ***pink*** dots form, dancing, lining the insides of her eyelids. It doesn't rid the persisting images: the fire blazing from Marcy's chest, the ghoulish ***orange*** painting her reaper-like, the sinister colour staring back, harrowing, deadly.

Horribly, the feeling's familiar. Dangerous desperation's an old friend, one Sasha knows well. It lurks within shadows, a false light reflecting back, alluring but crucially hopeless. She'd recognised it earlier but foolishly ignored it, much like her own. It's only when it'd returned, flickering between ***orange*** flames scorching skin, that Sasha had noticed, back when she'd been haunted by ghosts, hunted by death wearing a friend's face.

"I gave you everything."

Abruptly, Sasha sits up, nose whistling, inhaling a rush of air. Frustrated, she presses her eyes once more, blinking away the last bursts of ***blue***, ***green*** and ***pink*** before throwing her hands angrily into her lap. That ***wasn't*** Marcy – not the Marcy she knows. Her Marcy's incredibly smart, she's sweeter than honey, their lovable nerd. She's kind, she's funny, she's caring, she's… she's…

She's gone?

Past Anne's slumbering form, Marcy's bed lies empty. It's identical to her own: the pillow has an imprinted dip where Marcy should be and the covers are thrown to the end, all jumbled into an abandoned heap from sleepless sleep. The door remains shut and there's nowhere to go, but thankfully as her heart pounds worriedly, it doesn't take long to spot her when Sasha glances around the room.

By the window, Marcy sits silently. Perched on an uncomfortable chair, her knees are pulled up, arms hugging them into a tight, awkward hold. Paling light drapes her, painted ethereal within a mixture of luminous yellows and reflected moonlight. From where Sasha remains, her stomach ***churns***. Bandages peek from Marcy's hospital gown collar, with more covering her wrists.

"Old injuries," Marcy hesitantly explained before. It'd been the armour she'd worn and… before that. Still, as she'd said it, her eyes couldn't meet Sasha's and Sasha could only hear reminiscent sounds of metal clanging against metal, swords to a scythe, a dark laugh and dangerous desperation.

If Marcy notices, she doesn't react though. Back turned, she watches a world filled with plaguing darkness, lamps lighting a yellow brick path to nowhere with a starlit canopy of unreachable worlds above. Something aches within Sasha's chest at the scene, carving a cavernous hole where her heart lies. Marcy looks… cold, and though Sasha's unsurprised – despite being indoors, there's an icy bite to the air – there's also a deepening heaviness atop Marcy's drooping shoulders, one that feels inexplicably recognisable.

"I just didn't want to be alone."

A flicker of forgotten resolute ***pink*** returns. The feeling – strange, unknown, yet curiously familiar – grows, spreading from her hollowed heart, an unwavering fire crossing her torso. The warmth crackles along veins, drawing strength to her aching, exhausted limbs.

Marcy doesn't need to be alone, not now, or ever. Not whilst Sasha still lives and breathes.

Untangling from the blankets, Sasha carefully swings her legs over the bedside. At the movement, a dull throb strings along her spine, and as her feet touch the floor, sharp pains spike from her wounded ankle, lining the insides of her leg. Earlier, adrenaline and lost magic had kept her afloat, but now, she's riddled with festering after effects. It doesn't stop her though. Determined, Sasha pushes through, leaning towards the bedside table, taking the cane she'd been given for recovery. Pressing the end to the ground, Sasha tests the stability, feeling for its weight before cautiously pulling herself up and walking to where Marcy is.

"Room for one more?" Sasha asks softly, but when approaching, her feet falter considerably. Exhaustion casts over her suffering body in waves, her strength ebbing away, stolen into the night. Stumbling, she catches herself from falling, grabbing the back of the chair, leaning heavily against it and her cane.

Startled, Marcy jumps and when she finally faces her, something twists abysmally inside Sasha. Moon-kissed tears track Marcy's cheeks and though it's dark, Sasha sees the redness of her eyes. Her hair's tousled, likely from a rough night's sleep, and instinctively, Sasha brushes fingers through it, gently uncoiling locks as Marcy leans into the touch. Closer though, that awful feeling swirls. Mirrored on Marcy's face is a reflection of Sasha's: ghost-paled skin, jaw fear-locked tight, terror-filled darting eyes.

"Sorry Sashy, did I wake you?" Marcy winces, voice shrill, cracking at every syllable. Of course she worries over Sasha first, and she rushes to wipe her face with a bandaged wrist like she's been caught before an illusive mask casts over her. Uncurling from the chair, she hops to her feet, moving directly ahead of Sasha and steadies her, holding her forearms, "c'mere you, you should rest."

It's sweet, so typically Marcy, but it hurts now Sasha sees past the veil.

"Couldn't sleep," Sasha sighs tiredly, shoulders sagging whilst Marcy guides her to sit. Though she'd love to curl into the embrace – where it's safe, warm, homely – there's also something off, something desperate in her touch. When Sasha blinks, haunting ***orange*** spills behind her eyelids. Death watches her back, fingers constricting around her wrists. Naturally, she flinches but when she looks again, there's only a worried Marcy who's unable to meet her eyes. By the time Sasha sits, Marcy's already retreating away, disappearing under that veiled cloak, out of sight and out of mind.

Sasha won't make that mistake again – she ***can't***.

“Hey, wait,” she asks, lightly catching Marcy’s arm and ***frog***, she’s shaking, “is everything alright?”

Shadow-shrouded, Marcy turns towards her again. There’s an unreadable expression, but the more Sasha focuses, there’s a swirling hint of confusion within her eyes, as though she’d expected all the pieces to fall back into place, into routine. Warily, she looks at Sasha’s hand and Sasha’s skin feels like it’s been caught alight, razed, burning ***orange*** under that stare.

“Just a bad dream, that’s all,” Marcy admits, wearing an uncertain, forced smile, and Sasha hates it. The way she shrugs it off like it’s nothing, like she wouldn’t notice, wouldn’t care. “I’ll be fine, sorry if I worried you.”

“Of course I worry, I care about you,” Sasha reassures, letting go of Marcy’s wrist and shuffling to one side, patting the space left behind, “will you sit with me?”

This time, her smile is genuine.

Though it’s a squeeze, she accepts the offer, sliding beside Sasha and leaning on her shoulder. Avoiding agitating any injuries, Sasha wraps an arm around Marcy, resting her head against Marcy’s. They stay like that for a while, comforted within a group of just the two of them, quietly listening to one another’s peaceful, rhythmic breathing. She doesn’t remember the last time they’d done this – just been together, enjoying each other’s company.

She’s here now though, that’s what counts right?

“Mars, I know you didn’t wanna talk about it, but if you need someone, even just to listen, I want you to know I’ll be there, no matter the time or distance, alright?” Sasha promises, and she tucks herself closer to Marcy, pressing a light kiss atop her head, a lasting promise, “I know I’ve not been the best of friends, I could’ve been better – for you and Anne, but I love you, both of you, more than life itself. I’m sorry I never made that clear and–”

“I thought I killed you.”

Like a blade engulfed in ***orange*** flames, the words cut, sharp and clean. Suddenly, everything makes sense. The way Marcy slumps defeatedly, sniffling wetly and rubbing straying tears again. Loneliness is a silent killer, and even now, on the other side, Marcy’s still hunted as its prey.

You’re not alone, Sasha screams internally, but before she can voice the words, Marcy lays Sasha’s hand out on her lap, circling her palm with her pointer finger. It’s meant to be calming, Sasha thinks, the movement repetitive, a distraction, but she doesn’t think it’s helping.

“My nightmare,” Marcy clarifies – like it wasn’t obvious – but her voice wobbles as she recalls the details, “I was back ***there***, in the castle but I, uh, I could see ***everything***,” – she chokes back a sob, her finger halting in place before trembling fingers interlock with Sasha’s, gripping fearfully, “I struck you both down, there was so much… you were ***dead***. I couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t…”

For the first time since her rescue, Marcy ***weeps***. Tears stream down her face, and if she weren’t already sitting, Sasha knows Marcy would’ve dropped to the floor, distraught. The sight is… awful and strange. It’s reminiscent of the throne room before her world tilted, carpet pulled from under her feet. But then Marcy raises their conjoined hands, pressing her lips to the back of Sasha’s like an unspoken apology and something inside her ***breaks***.

“I’m so sorry, Marcy,” Sasha consoles, and refusing to let go even once, pulls her closer, tucking her into her chest. Tears stain her but she doesn’t care, not when Marcy’s hurting, aching in a way that can’t easily be fixed. All she can do is be there for her – just like she’d promised. “I’m here, alright? I’m here, you’re here and so is Anne. We’re alive and we’re going to be okay.”

Marcy shakes her head solemnly. “You know what the worst thing is?” she says regretfully, “I don’t ***remember***,” – fingers angrily curl into the fabrics of Sasha’s clothes – “I don’t remember ***anything***. Andrias stabbing me, Olivia and Yunan trying to save me, ***The Core***. They’re just events people talk about, but they’re not ***mine***. It’s my fault though, isn’t it? I asked for–”

“Don’t you ***dare***,” Sasha hisses. The words are harsh, angrier than she’d meant but she can’t help it. The weight of what Marcy’s feeling is unimaginable, but putting that blame on herself – when it was never a choice, forcibly inflicted onto her time and time again – ***infuriates*** Sasha. Taking a deep breath, fingers soothingly trailing Marcy’s hair, Sasha tries to calmly continue, “you didn’t deserve ***any*** of that, you hear me? And I’ll keep reminding you as many times as you need.”

“But,” Marcy starts, and Sasha has to hold back from cutting in, afraid to talk over, to take control like so many times before, “I hurt you. You’re hurt, ***still*** hurting, because of me.”

Taking Marcy by the shoulders, Sasha leans her back to face her directly. “Hey, look at me,” she instructs, and shakily, Marcy does, her eyes puffy, cheeks flushed red. “That wasn’t you, alright? The Core’s the one who did this. We thought we’d lost you. ***I*** thought I’d killed ***you***,” – and this time, it’s Sasha who swallows back a stifled sob – “but you’re ***alive***, you came back to us, back to me. I meant everything I’ve said, I swear. I’m sorry I wasn’t there, I’m sorry you felt like you had to shoulder things alone. I’m sorry for everything, but I love you and I want to be better for you.”

Adoration sparks within Marcy's teary eyes, a reclaimed smile tugging at her lips. With a quivering hand, she reaches up, a thumb running along Sasha's cheek, brushing away tears she'd never realised had been shed. "You already are," Marcy reaffirms, and her hand lingers on Sasha's cheek, bumping her forehead against hers, "I love you and I forgive you too."

That strange, determined ***pink*** from earlier returns in full force. Burning like a wildfire, it sizzles along Sasha's chest, but unlike a blaze, it feels safe, homely like a hearth as it spills, overflowing all around her. The sensation spreads, encompassing everything, and filled with resolved ***pink*** strength, Sasha presses an affectionate kiss to the tip of Marcy's nose.

Then, Marcy laughs. It starts as a soft giggle, light, airy and free and it only continues to build as she wraps her arms around Sasha's waist, resting her chin to Sasha's shoulder and pressing her cheek to Sasha's. And Sasha can't help but join in, pushing back into the chair as she pulls Marcy along with her, and everything feels so weightless, like all her burdens are gone with the wind.

"Sasha? Marcy?" a still-waking voice calls out, somewhere behind them, "where are you?"

Without another word, they both get up. With a renewed smile to her face, Marcy takes Sasha by the hand, guiding them both over to Anne's bedside. When they do, they find Anne lying on her back, eyes partly closed, half asleep, half awake as a searching hand stretches out towards them.

"We're here," Marcy hushes, and she intertwines her fingers easily with Anne's, who only smiles at the touch. When Marcy turns back to her though, there's a knowing look, and without saying anything more, Sasha nods in agreement.

Rounding around Anne's bed and using the sides to support her, Sasha discards her cane as she clambers onto the bed. She slides in by Anne's side and Anne welcomes her by curling an arm around her loosely, but ensuring she pulls her in close. On the other side, Marcy does the exact same.

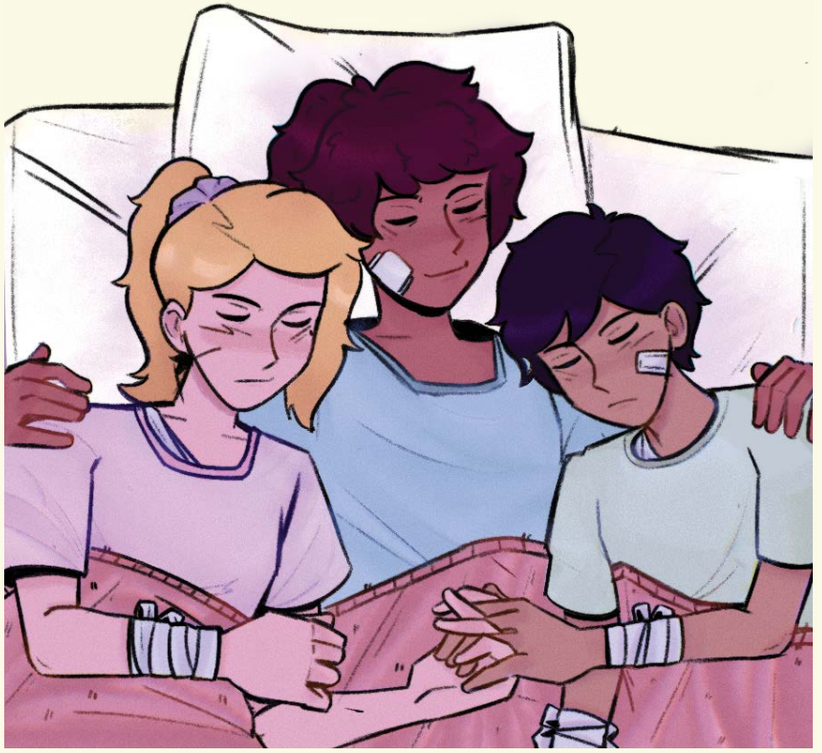
"Is everything alright?"

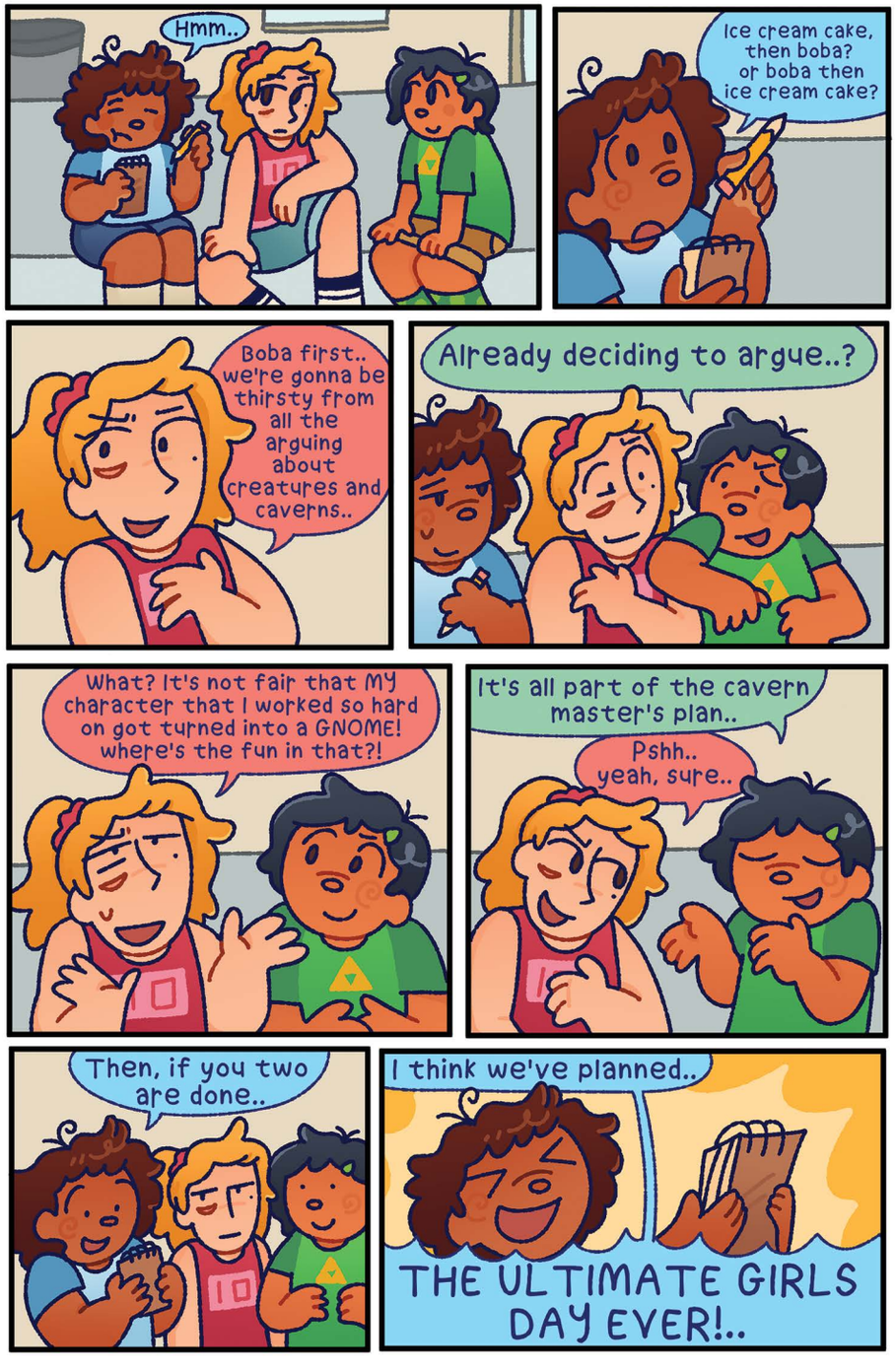
It's a loaded question, one Anne doesn't realise but as Marcy nestles into Anne's shoulder, she casts a look to Sasha, but this time, there's no reason to hide. After all, they both already know the answer, and reaching across, Marcy offers Sasha a hand, an offering that Sasha gladly accepts, tangling their fingers together.

"It's complicated," Marcy admits freely, and she sighs softly as Sasha runs her thumb along her knuckles, "but we'll be okay."

Things are complicated. After all, just like dreams, friendship, love and life are all complicated things, but that's the exact same reason why they're worth fighting so hard for. Sasha understands that, and with time, effort and support, things will eventually be okay.

They'll be okay, and with her hands tangled within Anne's and Marcy's, Sasha finally sleeps peacefully.




Hmm..
Ice cream cake, then boba? or boba then ice cream cake?
Boba first.. we're gonna be thirsty from all the arguing about creatures and caverns..
Already deciding to argue..?
What? It's not fair that MY character that I worked so hard on got turned into a GNOME! where's the fun in that?!
It's all part of the cavern master's plan..
Pshh.. yeah, sure..
Then, if you two are done..
I think we've planned..
THE ULTIMATE GIRLS DAY EVER!..

..For Marcy's going away party!
AHH, STOP! DON'T REMIND ME! MY HEART!
Anne! Don't you have to get going? Instead of torturing poor Marmar with reminders of her departure?
Huh..? Get go-
OH, FROG! YOU'RE RIGHT!
!
About having to go, not the dramatic diss..
I'll see you guys tomorrow, okay? LOVE YOU BOTH!
LOVE YOU, GIRL!
Tell Mrs. Boonchuy hi!
...

Sash..
..Yeah?
Take care of her for me..
Me..?
..take care of Anne?
The one who came back from the DEAD?!
HAHAHA
DANGIT! I know! I should've used that line with Anne!
What are you talking about..?
Oh come on, I just wanted one anime coming of age moment.. where I drop a hard-hitting line that leaves the audience with a chill!

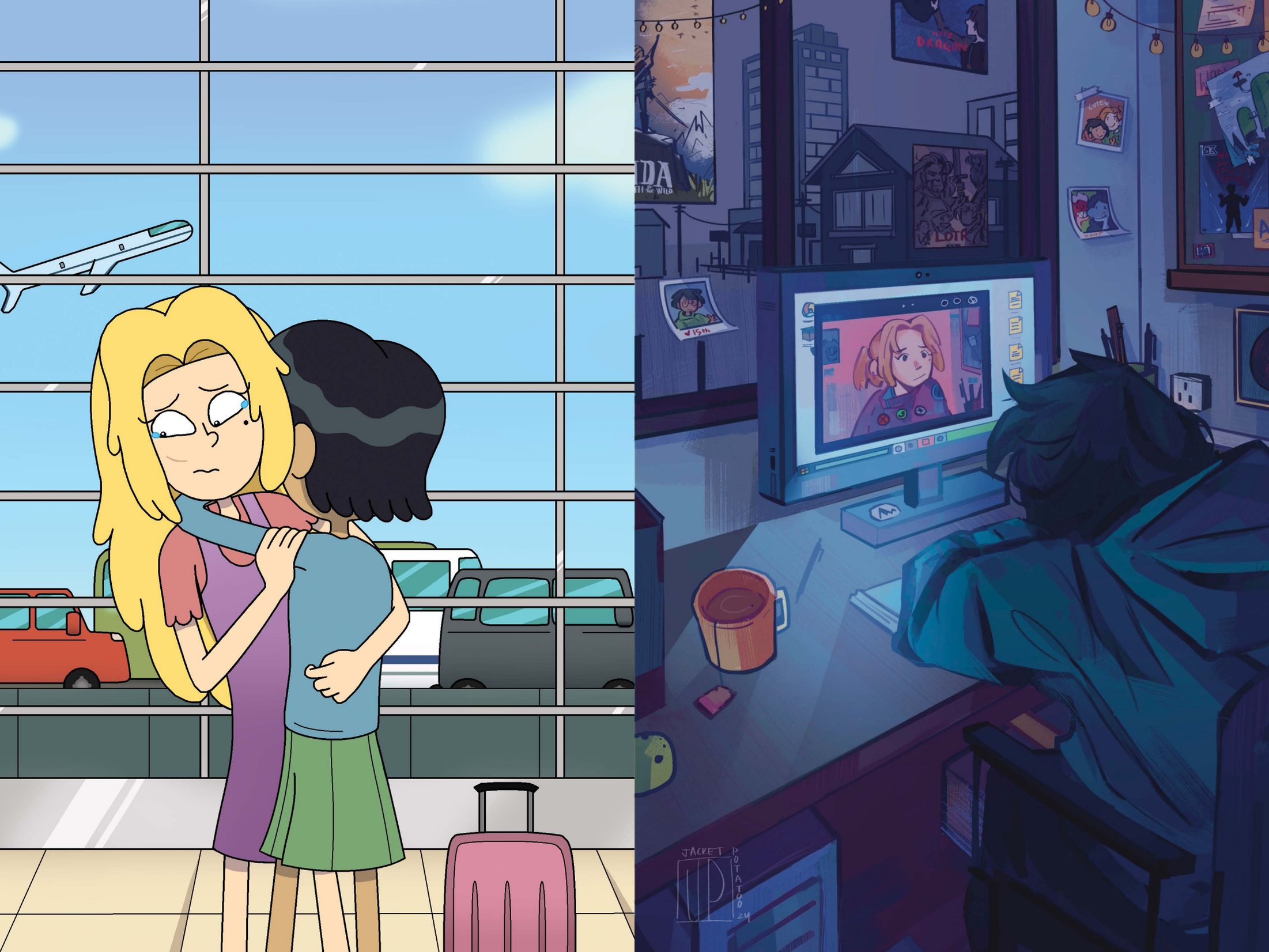
Hahaha..?A hard-hitting line? Is anything you say real?!
..Is anything YOU say real? Miss "Queen of Manipulation"
..You really got me there..
Ughh.. I can't believe Grime said that..
..Even if it's true.
..Sorry, too far? I thought we were bantering..
No, no.. I just can't believe how I acted back in Amphibia.. you two really deserved better.
I mean.. yeah, but that's why you got better, right? We all did crazy things in Amphibia, but we all learned to change there, too.
Yeah.. I guess so. I just feel pretty guilty about it.
I kind of took our friendship for granted..
And now that it's finally getting better, you're moving away!
Haha.. Yeah, kind of bad timing huh?
Or maybe it was meant to be like this, maybe if I stayed it'd all fall apart again!
Or in ten years I'll move back To L.A. and it'll be a hundred times better than it would have been!
Distance makes the heart grow Fonder they say..
...

Regardless of how things could have been.. or how the future could or couldn't go..
..We're here now, and I'm really happy we're here now, talking on this chilly curb..
..Procrastinating on saying goodbye..
CALL NOW
That's it!
!
..What's it?
Your hard-hitting anime line!
..Really?
Totally, super introspective.. really makes the audience think!
Thank goodness! My mark has been MADE!

Thanks, Sashy..
Aha!..No need to thank me!..
..Marbles.
CALL NOW

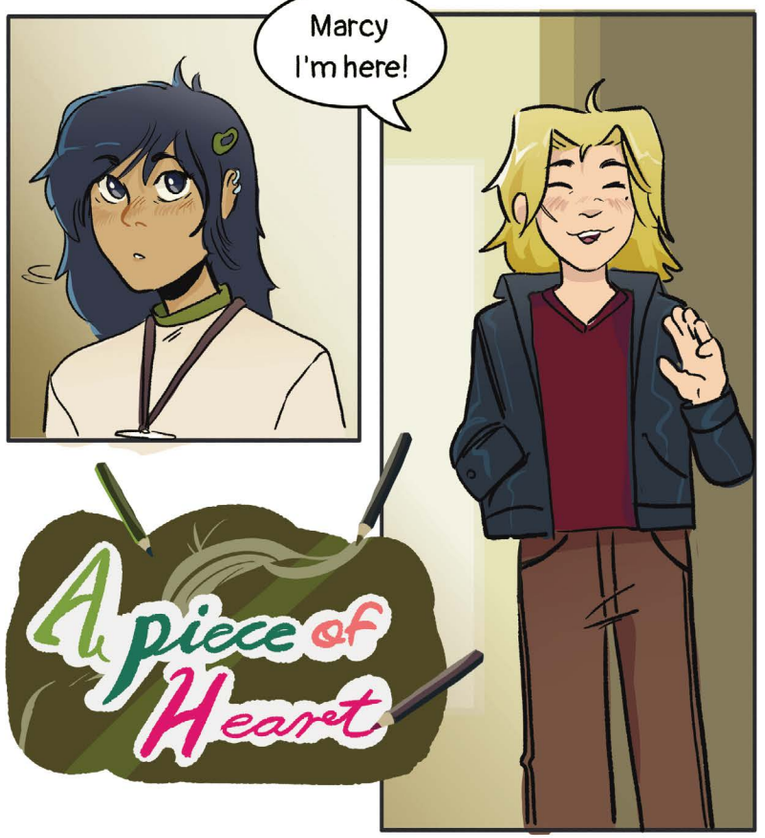
THE SHARPS
TUESDAY
DEC 13
ENTRY FEE
FREE
OPENING
8PM
BORN PINK

ToastyOwl

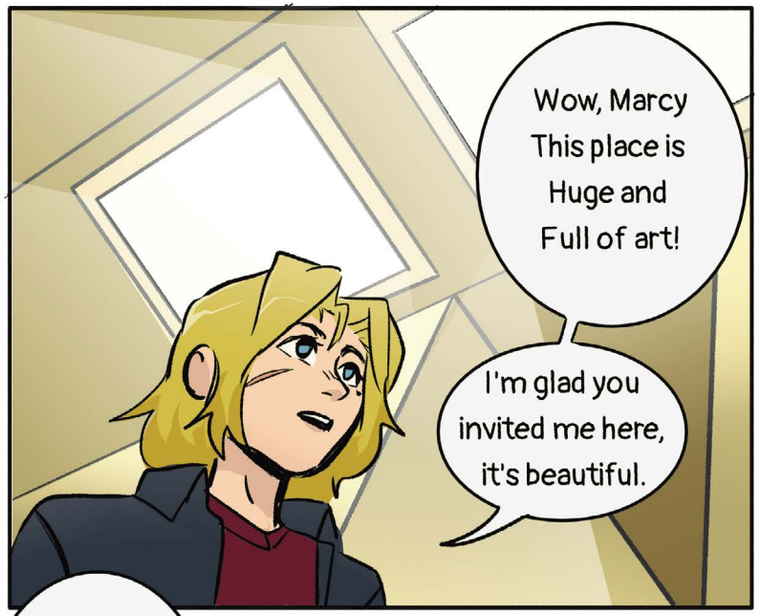

DRAGON
LOTR
15th
JACKET POTATOES

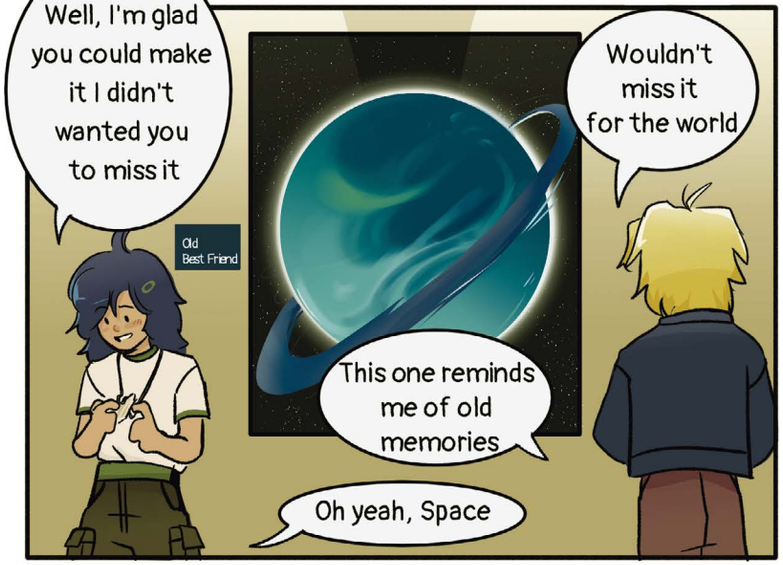
BFF
CAVERN MASTER
VAGABOND'S
BFF
SEE YOU IN 2 WEEKS! S.♡

FURANEESU
FURANEESU



A piece of Heart





Remember when I crushed that Stone Monster?
I was kind of a brute back then
I do
Now I'm the one spending all night studying
No more battles for me
Hahaha Time took us by surprise!
It did

So now I'm not the nerd, wow
So rude of you to say that
Hahaha! I'm messing with you!
Marcy!
I wanted to see that worried face
Let's go! I'ts time

It's a pleasure to introduce Marcy wu, as our guest artist!

I made this piece thinking about courage and love
Most specifically
The power to confront one self

To change and rethink but never giving up
The long forgotten warrior
On the ones you love
Of course, yes!
sasha? you noticed? what are y-
KISS!!
You really get me Marcy Wu
The end

Like Yours, Like Mine (Like Home)

Written by Mar
Spot Art by iersei

Summary

With Marcy staying at Sasha's during their time back in California, the two of them come crashing back into each other's lives. Over quiet lingering looks, fingers grazing delicate skin, and hormone shots, Sasha and Marcy realise that there's some people that will always be familiar to you.

Flavour of Sasharcy

Post-Epilogue

It's not entirely easy for Marcy to settle comfortably in Sasha's apartment, not yet. They weren't expecting to spend their time back in California in Sasha's apartment at all, just a couple days ago. It's hardly as if it'd be too difficult for them to find a hotel close by. It wouldn't be too expensive, either, they were only planning to stay for a week.

But one thing led to another, and Marcy's looking at a month back in California, sleeping in Sasha's room, in his bed. Marcy couldn't stop Sasha from declining any attempts for them to pay him back somehow, just like how they couldn't stop him offering his bed, explaining that he has no problems just sleeping in his boyfriend's room.

They make their way to Sasha's room now, a little surprised by the quiet of the apartment as they step inside. In the few days they've been here, Marcy's already let themself get used to expecting to bump into one of Sasha's partners in the hallway, or to at least hear signs of them living in the background- chatting, cooking, whatever.

Marcy hears the slight rumble of sound behind the door, but ignores it- figuring that it's probably just the surrounding noise. It wouldn't be the first time they were too perceptive to sounds, mistaking its proximity. They're unaware they're about to regret that negligence in just a couple seconds.

"Oh!"

The first thing Marcy sees as they open the door is Sasha's bare back to them. Her shirt's been lifted halfway above her head and she was very clearly not expecting to be interrupted.

Marcy can't help but notice there's tattoos trailing over her skin, her shoulder. They're ***trying*** not to let their gaze linger, especially not on the long scar running across her back. Its pale and pink vastness threatens to freeze them where they're standing forever.

"Who-" Sasha's head jerks back, eyes widening. "Marcy?"

"I'm not here! I'll just-" Marcy is already grabbing the door handle, ready to pull it back. "Sorry!"

"No, you don't need to go." Sasha turns around, properly removing his shirt, eyes darting across Marcy quickly, like he isn't quite sure they're really there. "This is basically your room now, anyway, I just came to get some stuff."

Marcy nods. They're aware how tall their frame is, standing still in the open doorway. Sasha looks at them for several seconds, before laughing. "You can come in, you know."

"Right." They enter the room with careful steps, setting their bags on the counter as if its contents are dangerously delicate. They aren't, but Marcy doesn't want to think too deeply on why they might be feeling so nervous.

Their eyes dance onto the table beside the counter, where Sasha's touch lingers. Her things are spilled out across its surface, a mess unlike anything Marcy would have left. There's the plastic bag at the back, ziplock, with disposable syringes squeezed inside. A small vial sits beside it, a singular syringe propped up, standing against the heavy little thing.

Marcy doesn't need to read the label pasted around the vial to know what it is. They have their own too, different but alike.

"Hey! Reminds me!" they say, suddenly remembering, and point vaguely at the pile made up of bags at the side of the room. "I should probably get to mine too."

"Your…?" Sasha prompts, confused. She turns and looks at where they're pointing, gaze settling for a couple seconds before she realises. "Ah. 'Course."

As Marcy goes to retrieve their pouch, with their own vial and syringes inside, they can feel Sasha watching them still. "You do shots too, right?"

"Mm-hm. Easier than trying to make pills." They find the pouch in their luggage, pull it out. "Almost poisoned myself once."

"Damn, really?"

"Uh, yeah. It wasn't fun."

"I can imagine." Sasha pauses, lips slightly parted as she meets their gaze. "Hey, would you want any help with that, though?"

"What?"

"We help each other with our shots sometimes." Sasha shrugs, and Marcy knows he's talking about his partners, even as he gestures up at the ceiling. "Perks of being T4T or whatever. Sometimes it's good for when needles get bad, but- it's just nice, I guess. Having people who get it, you know?"

Marcy looks at Sasha as she leans against the bed, settling down. Some part of them wants to disagree, to tell her that they ***don't*** actually know the intimacy Sasha is speaking of. But they know she's only being sincere, that she's offering them kindness. The urge to bite is unfair, unwarranted. So instead, they simply say, "You want me to help you with yours?"

Sasha has sat down on his bed, stretching out to reach for his syringes and vial. They can hardly keep from admiring how easily she does it, her muscles flexing beautifully as she bends and twists around, pushing her things onto her mattress.

"Or I could just do it for you, if you want." Sasha nods at the empty space on the bed, gesturing for Marcy to join her and sit. He shrugs. "I wouldn't complain."

Marcy does laugh at that hugging their pouch to their chest, so it doesn't slip from their fingers as their glee grows. They notice the way Sasha grins at the sound, and there's a part at the back of their mind that clings to it desperately.

Sasha holds out a hand as Marcy approaches, gesturing for Marcy to pass him their pouch. They hand it to her, finding it a little novel, watching Sasha begin to open the bag for them, retrieve the things inside.

"You've become quite the gentleman, huh?"

Sasha tilts her head at that, eyes wide and curious. Marcy sits down next to him, shifting a little to find some position that's comfortable. They end up with their feet crossed, leaning forward, looking up at Sasha.

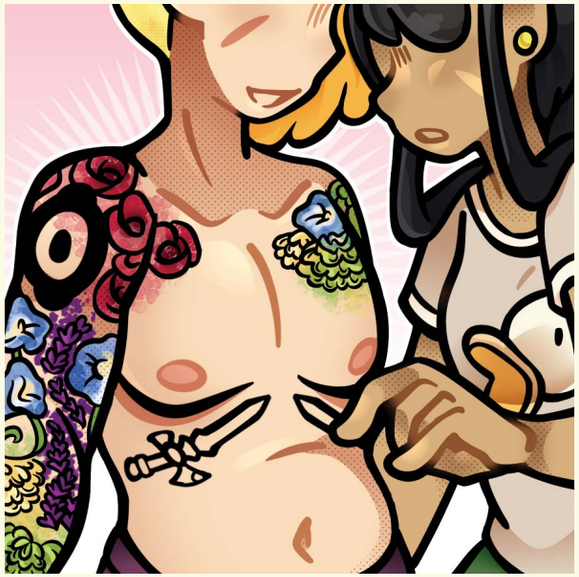
"Yeah. I guess so."

So close together, with their skin and breath almost connecting, Marcy can see Sasha's tattoos up close, taking them in fully. They notice the colours and shapes carved on him, how it doesn't just lie still on smooth skin. They bring out the coarse, rough surface of her body, and the short brown hair all across her skin gives a kind of depth to all the art he's had done above it. They're all different, too, they notice next- it's clear the tattoos were done with time between each of them, and never drawn again by quite the same hands.

There's the ink at his chest, thin black lines, below his top surgery scars. Two swords at each side, nearly identical in its sharp length, as if shadows to the pale pink scars above them. They keep gazing across her skin, following the line of the scars to her shoulder, where a circular symbol sits. After a moment, with a throb of feeling in their heart, they recognise it as the symbol of the Toad Army.

Flowers are a constant all across his skin, pastel rainbows petals splashed all over him. Several of them are repeated- the green, blue, and lavender ones in particular- but it always looks intentional, somehow. Marcy finds their hand reaching up to Sasha's chest slowly, as if in a haze. They don't have the first clue what the individual flowers are, much less what symbolism is no doubt behind each of them, but they can't help but yearn to know.

"They're beautiful."



Their eyes tilt up and finally meet Sasha's. It shakes them back to themself, and Marcy draws their arm back quickly, eyes darting to the floor. They try not to let their head linger on the little hum Sasha makes as they pull away.

"What do the flowers mean?" they say quietly, as they let their eyes wander back to her tattoos.

"You mean to tell me Marcy Wu ***doesn't*** have encyclopaedic knowledge on the language of flowers?"

Marcy decides to ignore her, instead looking among the floral patterns and waiting for one to stand out particularly. Their gaze lands on a couple of thin blue flowers, hanging on a vine swirled around them. "What's this one mean?" They point at it, making sure their skin isn't close enough to be touching.

Sasha looks down at his shoulder where they're pointing. After a couple seconds, she leans back and laughs, soft, almost like it's just for herself. "That's the morning glory, I think. Never been too good with names of stuff like this. I mostly picked it for the colour."

"Blue." They almost whisper it. Slowly, they have a sneaking suspicion they know what the flowers mean.

"For Anne." She gestures at herself, vaguely tracing where the flowers are painted across herself. "The flowers are for-"

"Us?"

Marcy bites their lip tightly as the word slips out- they hadn't meant to cut in like that. Sasha stares at them for a second, the corner of his lip twisting up, then looks away, at the space between them.

"Yeah. Everyone I've ever-" Sasha's fingers spread open for a second, clenching on the mattress. "All the people I'm the closest to."

Marcy nods, despite the slight pain in their gut. "And the rest of these?"

As Marcy picks up the syringe and vial, Sasha begins to explain what she can for her other tattoos, giving little snippets of the stories behind each colourful flower, each inked line. The swords seem to be an obvious homage to his old weapons, so deliberately similar to the ones he wielded in Amphibia. Sasha doesn't dispute that, but he shares that it's also a little nod to his gender and sexuality.

"I've never really been able to separate realising my gender from realising I'm bi so," Sasha waves a hand around. "Getting it so soon after top surgery was still pretty stupid, though."

"I remember," they say softly. "You sent me photos after! It didn't exactly sound fun."

Sasha affirms it with a gorgeous laugh, scooting close on his own accord at the sight of the syringe in their hand. He starts pointing around the flowers on his skin, not noticing their awkward hesitance with the syringe in their hand. Or perhaps not minding.

Marcy manages to keep their hand firm and steady as Sasha tells them how the colours aren't always necessarily for just one person. He goes on about how the red is undoubtedly tied to the toads in Amphibia, they're also red for his lovers. The lavenders are for them once again, a queer symbol as old as time, for the people who've been there as he came into himself, who helped him there most. Marcy doesn't have time to let any stray feelings of jealousy linger at the sound of that, though, since Sasha is explaining the significance of the green and yellow zinnias before they get the chance.

They already had some ideas on who they could have been for, but hearing Sasha say to them that she missed them so dearly as she had them painted on her skin- it's enough to almost make their arm shiver, with the needle of the syringe still piercing Sasha's skin.

As Marcy pulls it away gingerly, they find themself feeling strange as they tell Sasha how their own journey with their queerness seems almost silly when held up against his. So much of how they came to realise they're transfem, that they're a lesbian, has been because of the time they spent with fiction, identities they discovered resonated based on things they saw online.

"I don't think it's silly. We had different experiences. I had more chances to meet people physically. You found your truth online. It's fine." He shrugs.

Marcy laughs at that, not quite sure how else they could react. At the back of their mind, they're aware it shouldn't truly feel reassuring. If they didn't know Sasha Waybright as well as they do, it might almost feel insulting. Instead, all it does is make them feel a little better, oddly enough.

"Should we do yours now?" Sasha asks, after a while, realising they've only been sitting and chatting for quite a few minutes. Marcy makes sure to move and grab their pouch before Sasha can do it for them, picking it up and handing it to her.

The pouch has seen better days, its age showing in its edges almost undone, with stray strands of strings that have begun to pop out. There are the patches they've stitched and pasted down on it, some they bought from other artists, some they made themself. Marcy can see the little, faint doodles they've drawn done in markers too, its colour having mostly faded by now.

In front of them, Sasha tilts his head just slightly, beckoning for them to shift closer. He's holding the syringe up close to his chest, watching them carefully. Marcy's gaze holds on the tip of the needle for a second longer than they'd like, and they find themself frozen in their place, even as they'd planned to scoot close.

For his part, Sasha doesn't seem to notice, taking their stillness with a shrug, with her moving in closer instead. He rests his free hand on their thigh, stroking their knee with his thumb. "Still okay, yeah?"

Marcy nods, their voice shaky as it hangs in their throat. It's okay, they tell themself. It's just Sasha. It's ***Sasha***, for god's sake. They ***know*** her. Marcy isn't nervous, they have no reason to be. They ***shouldn't*** be nervous.

Then Sasha is leaning over them, bringing the syringe close, making it cast a faint shadow on the rough skin of their thigh. Marcy feels the hair on their skin standing, their limbs clamming up again, like they did just a couple moments prior.

Is their sudden difficulty in breathing real or a figment? Marcy thinks they're inhaling, exhaling, but they can't quite feel it, like their body is not quite here. Or maybe it's their mind.

Despite their unease, Marcy has managed to convince themself that they'll be okay. That hope hangs on still, right until the moment Sasha has one hand on the bed, beside their body, to support his own weight, the full form of the syringe hovering over their skin like a sword.

It happens in a blur, and Marcy can't say for sure which comes first- Sasha's finger moving to the end of the syringe, to push it down, or Marcy's arms coming up to her hand, shoving her away from themself. In the end, it doesn't really matter, the result remains the same.

Sasha is knocked back from the force of their push, the syringe falling down onto the empty space of the soft mattress between them. It's quick, only really a slight tumble backwards, but it's loud, with Sasha's yell of shock as well as the noise from the shuffle.

When the haze starts fading, and Marcy realises what they did, they immediately try to get up and fix it, but they can't. They're still shaking, limbs still numb.

"***Shit!*** Shit, shit- Sash, are you-?"

Sasha holds his palm up, both a command to stop, and an attempt to calm them down. "Don't worry about it. You're good."

Marcy watches in mild terror as Sasha shifts himself back into upright sitting, pushing himself forward with his arms. They notice her running a hand over the mattress, smoothing out the ruffled fabric. They notice how he leaves the syringe lying there, making a point not to touch it.

"I'm ***so*** sorry. I don't know what-"

"Hey." Sasha nudges their arm. "I meant it. I'm okay. You don't have to apologise."

Marcy wants to apologise again, considers it, holding the thought for longer than they should. They don't look at Sasha. "Okay."

"But," Sasha says. It takes Marcy a moment to realise she's continuing where she left off. "It wouldn't hurt to know how I could help, you know?"

"Okay. Yeah." Marcy closes their eyes tightly. There's a part of them, a large part, that isn't quite thrilled to explain what happened. They had a hunch their edge would flare into panic, but they really thought they could get through it quietly.

“It hasn’t been much of a problem anymore, so I wasn’t expecting it to-” Marcy brushes a hand over themself, feeling their skin. They feel their jaw tightening, but they force themself to breathe through it. “Needles have always been a bit… hard, after coming back from Amphibia. Back when I- when King Andrias…”

Marcy’s voice trails off. They don’t know how to explain this to Sasha. Did they tell him about it, back then? Did they talk to their friends about what Andrias did to them? Marcy doesn’t remember.

“You don’t have to tell me if it’s too much, Marbles.”

“It’s not.” Marcy shakes their head, holding their hands together tightly. “I need- it’ll help. To say it. I think.”

“Alright.”

“You remember the Core?” they start, looking pointedly down at their fingernails. They’ve grown a little long. “When they… most of it is a haze, really. But I still remember Andrias had me trapped in that chair, and there were these pipes that came from everywhere, and they had these needles on them they used to download themselves inside me and- ***fuck***.”

“It was awful. The pain- I was so ***scared*** and- So! Needles were… sort of difficult. To deal with. For a while, after coming back.”

“Holy shit. I’m so sorry.”

“No, I-” Marcy breathes in, stopping themself. “It’s been forever since then. I’ve gotten better at handling it. My parents, they’ve helped too. A lot, surprisingly! It’s more or less stopped being an issue the more I could distance myself from Amphibia, and everything that happened there.”

They keep talking, words slipping past their lips, all almost without truly knowing what they’re going to say. Only when they’re done, do they realise what they said at the end. That’s not what they meant. At least, they don’t think it is.

Sasha is looking at them with her eyes widening slowly and, with a glance down, Marcy can see that she’s slowly pulling her hand away. His lips have parted, just a little, like he’s not sure what to say.

“I don’t want you to go.” They say it desperately, a plea, reaching out to clasp their fingers over Sasha’s retreating hand.

Sasha’s eyes lock on them, the soft and warm hue of it looking almost as if it’s glistening. The air between them seems to be hanging still, a dance frozen in the midst of a spin, waiting for the pin to drop on the floor.

“Okay.” He turns his hand around, flipping it so he can hold their hand too. She gives their fingers a gentle squeeze. “I’m right here, Marcy.”

Sasha looks at them carefully, letting a pause hang in the air between them for a moment before speaking again. “Do you still want me to help you do your shot?”

“Yes,” Marcy says, without any hesitation.

Sasha nods, giving them a soft little smile. “Okay.”

Marcy turns their gaze to the side as Sasha picks up the syringe again. The wall is very grey, underneath all the posters, prints and photos pasted above it. If they squint, they can see themself in some of them. A lot of them.

Sasha scoots over, again, and they reach back with their hands so they can lean backwards without falling. The position’s a little awkward, with their hands still feeling just a slight cloudy, but they manage. Sasha leans forward with the syringe, and then pulls back.

“Would it be better if we moved closer to the wall? So you could-?”

“Yeah. That-” Marcy stops themself and looks down at their hands. ***You’re stalling,*** Marcy doesn’t say. ***For me.*** Instead, they just add a soft, “thanks.”

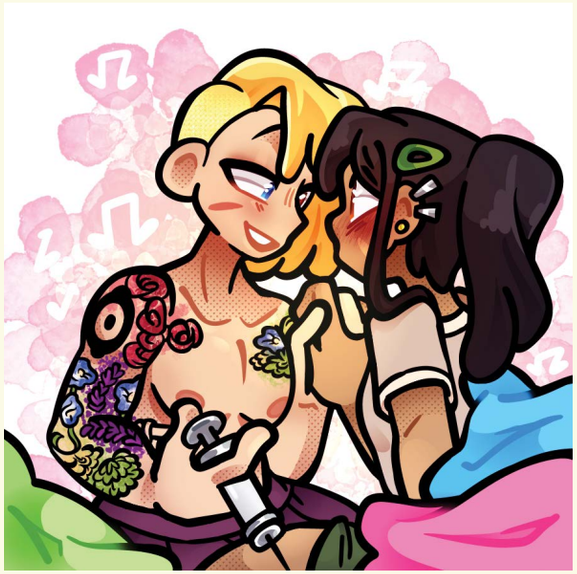
“It’s okay, Marcy.”

So they shift to the front of the bed, Sasha rushing forward before them to readjust the pillows. He doesn’t sit down in front of them until he’s made sure they’re lying back, sitting perfectly comfortably. She has to smooth over the pillow another time before she’s happy enough to move away. It’s so painfully ***Sasha*** that a giggle creeps out of their lips despite their nerves.

Sasha smiles in turn, but Marcy gets the feeling it’s controlled, like he’s afraid they might take a laugh as teasing. There’s a part of them that feels like it wants to argue the point. ***I’m not a princess, Sash,*** they can imagine themself saying. ***You don’t have to be so soft with me. I’ve been through a lot.***

But they don’t ***want*** to be strong. Not really. When Sasha sits back down and looks at them, all softness in her eyes, all they want is to be as delicate as the sun, to melt and let themselves be taken care of again. So they do that.

And when Sasha looks at them again, leaning forward and holding out his hand to them, they take it. Their fingers interweave easily, like the last piece of a puzzle clicking into place.



The sight of the syringe again makes Marcy squeeze Sasha's hand in their own, maybe too tight for comfort, but Sasha doesn't seem bothered. As the syringe is raised up to them, they finally decide to look away from the scene, shutting their eyes with a tight inhale.

Sasha's voice coming out as a gentle hum takes Marcy by surprise, enough that they peel their eyes open, blinking at him. Sasha meets their gaze, a brow lifting up to check if they're alright. Marcy nods. It is reassuring- having music in their ears, calming their head. The melody is familiar, though they can't quite place it yet. They won't say it aloud, but it especially helps that it's Sasha's voice that's soothing them.

They make themself focus on that as they feel the point of the needle graze the skin of their thigh, and they tighten their grip on Sasha's hand even more. As it passes their skin, they're hit with realisation of why they recognise Sasha's humming. The realisation manages to distract them from the full awareness of the pain from the needle piercing their skin, though only just barely.

Marcy remembers its melody with much more ease than they do the actual song, with faint flashes of standing onstage fluttering across their mind. If they close their eyes and take their mind away from where they are now, they can almost feel thin drumsticks in their hands, the invisible weight of the glitter painted on their face. ***Anne's song***. It very nearly stops the hiss of pain slipping past their lips as Sasha pushes the syringe down to give them their shot. Marcy finds themself tightening their grip even more, almost impossibly, and Sasha matches the force in return, a firm reassurance.

It hurts ***less*** as Sasha pulls it out of their skin, but the sensation is still bright and stinging. They maintain their hold on Sasha's hand even as she turns to throw the syringe away, shifting forward when she does too. They only let their fingers loosen when he's sitting in front of them again, their eyes meeting as he raises a brow, checking in on them once more. Marcy begins to shift, about to push themself up higher, figuring it's as good an affirmation as anything, but Sasha stops them.

"Hang on," she says, her hand brushing their knee. "I'm gonna clean that up for you first."

Marcy spares a glance down at their thigh, and can spot barely a glimpse of the tiny dot of red forming there. They don't say anything, though, as Sasha leans over to grab their pouch, pulling out some small cotton tissues and a plaster.

His touch is still delicate as he rubs the pieces of cotton over the wound, dabbing little droplets of ointment on each piece beforehand. Marcy's almost forgotten they have that bottle in there too, for how infrequently they've felt the need to use it. Sasha's taken to whispering sweet nothings to them as she tends to them too, and Marcy can catch just the vaguest sense that she's reassuring them again.

Sasha's head is bent over as he peels open the plaster, tracing their skin carefully before he finally sets it down on them.

When Sasha tilts her head up at them, they aren't expecting it. Their eyes meet, and Marcy feels a different type of nervousness growing under their skin. While they're keeping their gaze firm and steady on Sasha though, they notice his little slip- the tiniest glance down their face. Marcy finds their teeth sneaking out to chew at the tip of their lips, to keep from bursting into a grin that's all too gleeful.

There's a slight hint of pink growing on Sasha's cheeks, and Marcy can only imagine similar is happening to them, what with the heat rising to their face.

"Mars, I-"

Marcy leans forward and grabs Sasha's face, kissing him on the lips before he can say anything else. Sasha's lips are warm and dry- it's the first thing they notice, before the rest start hitting them. It's a short kiss, all things considered, but it still leaves Marcy scrambling to gather themself back to their senses when they finally pull away.

“Wait, wait, wait-” Marcy’s saying, catching her breath, words escaping against her will. “***Wow***, um-”

“I- huh.”

“So… what does this mean? Would- do you want to be my girlfriend? Is girlfriend okay? Would boyfriend be better, or-? Hell, I’m getting way ahead of myself, aren’t I? I don’t even know-”

This time, Sasha is the one who cuts them off, leaning forward and taking up their hand, drawing it up to his chest. Marcy can feel her heartbeat, steadfast and quick.

“Marcy. ***Darling***. Look at me,” Sasha says. Marcy does, looking up to see how brightly she’s smiling. “Either is fine. Shit, anything is okay, as long as I’m with you.”

“Wait, okay, so. You do want-?”

“Yes, Marcy.” Sasha raises their hand to his lips, planting a soft kiss to their knuckles before letting them pull away, flustered. “I’d kill to be your boyfriend, if you’ll have me.”

Marcy tries to reach for one of the pillows behind them, still unsure if they want to bury their face in it or toss it at Sasha’s face. Their ***boyfriend***. Sasha leans forward to stop them, and Marcy doesn’t even bother making any token attempts of resistance.

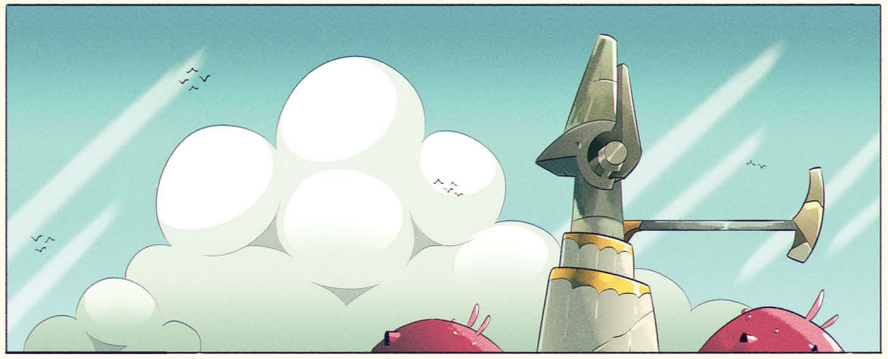
Sasha’s still moving forward towards them, though, and they almost surprise themself as they let themself fall down on the bed on their back. Their head sinks down in the pile of pillows at the same time Sasha’s scooted over to bend over on top of them, her hair falling down beside her head, casting shadows over her face.

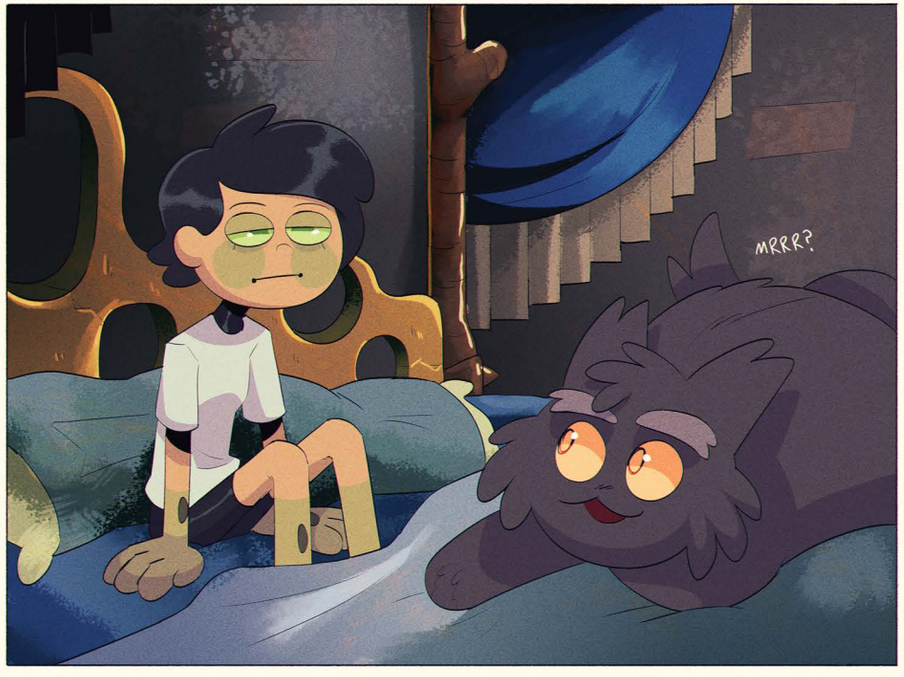
“This is crazy,” they say, but they can’t stop smiling. Their face almost hurts, and all they’re doing is lying there and looking up at the girl they’ve always been in love with. “You’re my ***boyfriend***, Sash! Tell me this is crazy.”

Sasha sets her hands next to each side of the pillow pile, putting her weight onto her arms. Marcy is grinning still as he bends his head down, lowering so their foreheads can touch. They can see through the curtain of hair that he’s closing his eyes, and they resist the urge to chuckle. ***Knight Sasha bending the knee to be anointed by the queen***.

“It’s not crazy,” Sasha says, with only confidence, as if doing something as simple as stating the position of the sun in the sky. “It’s ***you***. And me. I love you.”

Despite the laugh forming on their lips, threatening to have them keeling over, Marcy finds an unfamiliar strength in their arms, and they push themself up to Sasha’s face. They press a kiss to the space between her brows. The touch of his rough and tender skin against their own chapped and bitten lips feels like a homecoming, the way they always knew it would.




MRRR?

HOP
HOP

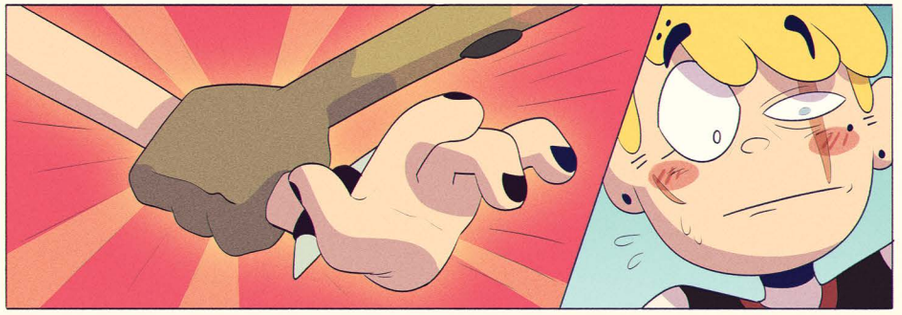
CLICK!!

KNOCK
KNOCK!

ZOOM

BLEED

!!



BLEED
OUT

??

NO
ZZZ
POP!!
WELL THAT WAS A WEIRD DREAM.
?!

The Sweet Escape

Written by Joanie
Spot Art by Ivy Pond

Summary

Sasha and Marcy are locked inside an escape room during a city-wide blackout. in the darkness, they have nothing better to do than talk about anything and everything... until Marcy suggests they find a way to break out without electricity.

Flavour of Sasharcy

Post-Epilogue

"So I was thinking," begins Marcy, and pauses.

Sasha cocks an eyebrow, leveling a piece of toast at her. "As usual."

A snort escapes her as she deftly plucks the toast from Sasha's unguarded fingers (a protest visibly builds in Sasha's chest but dies on her lips) and continues, "I was ***thinking*** that, if you're free this weekend—"

"—I am," Sasha interjects immediately, and her hand goes to her phone, thumb flying across the screen even as she's nodding for Marcy to continue.

"—we could do something? Together?" she finishes hopefully.

Sasha looks up. "Marcy. Yeah, of course." And then she puts her phone down and leans on the countertop dining table, both forearms pressed against it as her whole torso gravitates towards Marcy. "Did you have something in mind?"

Okay, Marcy. Now's your chance, she thinks, steeling herself. "Okay, so I know you don't really do puzzles, but hear me out—"

"I could do a puzzle," Sasha insists, almost ***petulant***, with the same amount of aggression that she puts into every venue in which her skills are challenged.

"Will you do an escape room with me?" Marcy blurts, grimacing after it's out, her teeth clicking together. Then she feels compelled to explain: "I've done a couple on the East coast, I know it's not totally your thing but I really think if you try it, and if we go together, we can make the dream work, you know?"

Marcy's fingers tense with jittery anticipation as Sasha considers it, and ugh, she's always been a little harder to get a good read on—too many years of practice being coy.

Finally, Sasha says, "...Yeah, actually. That sounds really cool." She hesitates, and then admits, "I probably won't be too much help since you're the one with all the brains, but I think it'll be fun."

And then she smiles, and oh, ***Frog*** if it doesn't light Marcy's face on fire.

XXX

The escape room that Marcy picked is only a few blocks from the apartment, so Sasha regrettably can't cruise through the streets of L.A. with one of the most gorgeous people she's ever known in her passenger seat.

Still, it's nice to walk alongside Marcy as she excitedly explains the escape room, how it's kind of a chain thing but they do different scenarios in different cities, so ***this*** one is really cool, and it's one of the only escape rooms that has rooms made for pairs in addition to large groups.

Sasha ***is*** listening. She's just also thinking about how Marcy's hands are clasping the strap of her crossbody bag and how much she kind of wishes that her left hand was at her side so that Sasha could just kind of brush against it, casually lace her fingers between Marcy's. Maybe she would chicken out, throw out a lighthearted, deceptive ***Just like when we were kids, huh?*** and Marcy would laugh and keep holding her hand and she could keep her dignity.

"We're here!" Marcy announces, snapping Sasha out of her romantic reverie.

The place is pretty cool, kind of minimalist, allowing small groups to gather in its lobby. Sasha slips her hands in her pockets and lets Marcy take the lead, standing just behind her.

"It's a two-level room," explains the attendant, whose name tag reads 'Jaina - they/them'. "There's a button for hints if you get stuck, and you'll get three of those." They open the door to the first part of the room and Sasha blinks, surprised at how ***small*** it is. Jaina continues, "This door operates on an automatic lock system, so we'll be able to get you out at any time. Any questions?"

Marcy glances at Sasha.

"Nope," she says, because she's resolved to let Marcy take point on this. Besides, the sooner Jaina locks them in, the sooner she gets to see Marcy in her element.

With that, the door closes, the timer starts, and she's suddenly alone in a locked room with Marcy Wu.

Even as she's searching for clues around a console table, Marcy has the presence of mind to explain: "So the story on this one is that we've been sent to infiltrate the home of a renowned neurologist so we can find her notes on mind control. I think this first room is like a waiting room?"

"Just like waiting to get a talking to from the principal," Sasha reminisces, and grins when Marcy laughs. "Where do you want me, Mars?"

"Umm," Marcy hums, glancing between the drawers and the bookshelf set against the wall. "Can you start checking to see if those books move? Sometimes they're like, spring-loaded for a code, or taking out a certain book will reveal some kind of symbol that leads us to the next clue. I'm trying to see if there's anything in this table that might help…"

Sasha nods, and starts tugging on the books, startled when she finds that Marcy was right—a lot of them have been glued down or something, unable to be moved. She runs her hands along them, looking to see what might betray movement, and ***there***—fourth row, near the end. She pulls out a book and ***shouts*** as she opens it to find that the pages inside have been cut out, and within lies a tiny key.

Triumphantly, she holds it up, and Marcy, who had turned around to see what happened, yelps, the shock in her face quickly giving way to what Sasha once called ***the thrill***: the spark of life in her eyes born from sheer chaos.

She hands the key to Marcy, a shiver going down her spine as their fingers brush, and Marcy starts trying the key on the drawers, deftly moving on when one doesn't match the key's teeth.

Just as she gets the right one, the drawer opening with a satisfying ***click***, the lights go out in the tiny room, leaving them in pure darkness.

Everything is off. The timer's previously anxiety-inducing red countdown is now gone. Are they being pranked or something?

"Do you think this is part of the escape room?" Sasha asks dryly, and then a horrifyingly loud ***crash*** sounds outside, and she whips towards the sound, grimacing as Marcy puts on her phone's flashlight and the room goes from pitch black to spotlighted.

Marcy, in the phone's harsh lighting, looks terrified but determined. "No way to tell unless we investigate all the options," she declares, and goes to try the door.

Sasha presses the hint button, and she isn't sure what she expected to happen, but she's almost disappointed when the screen in the room remains dark.

"Nothing," Marcy says, a tremor in her voice.

"Hang on, I got this," Sasha assures her, and is ***extremely*** glad she wore her good kicking boots today.

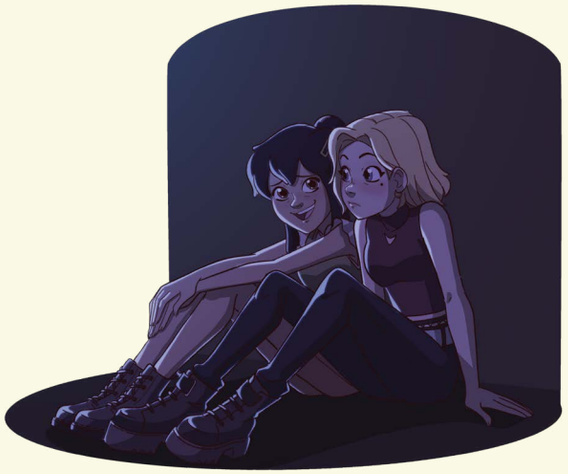
She aims her kick near the doorknob, where her force will be most effective at breaking the lock. When her boot makes contact with the door, there's a weird sound—like something is knocking back against the door's other side. Sasha pauses, then tries again, and a third time, just to make sure she's hearing it right.

"Ah, nuts," she mutters. "Mars, I think we're stuck here."

Marcy exhales through her teeth. “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that. Standard rescue protocol says the best thing to do in this kind of situation is stay put and wait for help, I think.”

With nothing else to do, Sasha goes over to where Marcy has her back pressed against a bare wall and joins her, and they slide down the wall in unison until they’re both sitting on the floor, knees drawn up.

“For some reason, I didn’t think we would be spending Saturday like this,” Marcy jokes. Then she huffs a breath through her nose. “I’m sorry, Sash.”



“What for?” Sasha asks, wrinkling her brow and nose to indicate amused confusion. “***You*** didn’t cause whatever this is.”

Marcy closes her eyes. “If I hadn’t suggested an escape room—”

“—Then we’d probably be bored at home,” Sasha says, and puts a hand over Marcy’s where it sits on her knee. “This is preferable. Trust me.”

“If you say so,” Marcy says. “Does this remind you of that time we got locked in the janitor’s closet?”

It does; Sasha doesn’t like to think about that time. She hadn’t realized it then, but she had gotten a little flustered being stuck in that small space with Marcy, and had taken that feeling out on her. “It reminds me of the lessons I learned from the time we got locked in the janitor’s closet,” Sasha confesses. “I wasn’t good to you when we were kids.”

“Ah,” Marcy says lightly, and tilts her head to rest it against Sasha’s shoulder. “That old song and dance, huh?”

Sasha sighs and rests her head against Marcy’s. “We can talk about something else—I’ve always meant to ask you about the webcomic. Like, did you ever want to just give up.”

“Literally every day,” Marcy says dryly. “Every single time I’m facing down lineart, Sash.”

“You know what I meant.”

A bubbly laugh bursts from Marcy, who says, “Yeah, I know. Well…I realized life is too short not to go after what you really want. You know what I mean?”

The air gets knocked out of Sasha’s lungs. “Yeah,” she all but wheezes. “Yeah, I know the feeling.”

“Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?” Marcy asks, abrupt.

Sasha raises her eyebrows. “Go ahead.”

“Do you still swordfight?” There’s a weird tension in Marcy where her right arm is pressed against Sasha’s left, and Sasha can’t help frowning at it.

“Sometimes,” she divulges. “Some college friends dragged me to a renaissance faire once, and I entered a competition for fun. It’s a neat party trick, when I can find someone else who’s into it.”

She wishes she could see Marcy’s face, because all she has to go off of right now is soft breathing, and then Marcy says almost mournfully, “I never really got to see you do it. Anne told me about it, but…I wasn’t ***there*** for a lot of it.” And Sasha can hear the layers in the word ‘there’ covering both her physical and mental absences, and her heart sinks in her chest.

“I’ll go with you sometime,” she offers. “I’ll show off a little. Is that okay?”

The smile is audible when Marcy says, “Yeah, I think I can stomach you showing off a little, Waybright.”

Sasha can’t help laughing, squeezing Marcy’s hand. They fall into a silence that could be uncomfortable, probably, if it was happening to anyone else but them. But leaning against her like this is a comfort of its own.

After a bit, Sasha wonders aloud, “Do you think they forgot about us?”

“I was scared you forgot about me,” Marcy blurts, and claps her hand over her mouth as if she hadn’t meant to say that.

Sasha lifts her head to look at Marcy, frowning. “What? Mars, what are you talking about? Who could ever forget you?” When Marcy doesn’t answer, Sasha bites her lip and confesses (since they’re confessing things), “...I was scared you wouldn’t want to be my friend anymore. After all that time.”

As if informed that it was her turn, Marcy lifts her own head, whipping to face Sasha in shock. “***You?***” she asks, baffled. “You have to be kidding—***everyone*** wants to be your friend, you’re—Sasha, you’re ***amazing***. How could anyone fall out of love with you?”

The words hit Sasha like a gut punch, and her lips fall open as all the air escapes her lungs again, her eyes wide. Marcy doesn’t look like she understands what she’s just said, because there’s an unbelievably earnest look on her face in the phone light.

She looks between Marcy’s eyes, and then looks around the room, remembering where they are. She can’t stay here like this. It’s too much, it’s—

“Okay,” she announces. “Okay. No more waiting around. I’m getting us out of here.”

Marcy says, hesitant, “Well, I saw another few doors upstairs as we passed by to get here, and the staff person mentioned that there’s a staircase? I think we could just make our way through the room and out if the entrance is blocked?”

Sasha nods. “Good thinking, Mars. Let me see if I can kick down that door to the next room.”

She stands, making her way to the other door in the room as Marcy and her phone flashlight follow. Once again, she tries kicking it down, but this door is too heavy—and there’s something about it that’s not built for being kicked down.

“Let me try,” Marcy says, and pulls out a battered-looking library card. Sasha lifts an eyebrow, and Marcy just smiles enigmatically. “What? You’re not the only person in this room who broke into things when we were kids.”

A complicated feeling dances around in Sasha’s chest as her face floods with heat, watching Marcy figure out the lock. She’s been relegated to phone light holder while Marcy works her magic, and then Marcy swears.

“Sash, I can’t pull open the door with the knob, I need you to stick your fingers in the gap and like pull the door open towards us? Does that make sense? There’s something weird about this lock, I don’t—”

Sasha’s already doing as Marcy asked, using her core muscles to pull the door as Marcy adjusts the card in the side of the door, and then there’s a ***click***, and suddenly Sasha’s pulling the door open, Marcy trying to help her from the other side.

When she gets up, she takes Marcy’s phone with her, and holds the door open even as she sees the staircase that was mentioned.

She looks at Marcy, who looks back at her, and they give each other resolute nods before heading up the stairs.

XXX

“Gosh, this would have been so cool to actually solve,” Marcy says wistfully as they enter the neurologist’s office, full of its little clues and gimmicks. “I’ll try the card trick on the door, see if we can get out.”

“Sounds good,” Sasha says, and Marcy is once again tempted to apologize for bringing her to what is maybe the worst sort-of-kind-of date that isn’t a date but she wants it to be a date really badly that has ever been planned in existence. But she won’t, because Sasha’s already reassured her.

Still. She can’t help going back over that triumphant shout of joy Sasha let out when she discovered the key—she’d kind of wanted to let Sasha solve more of it.

The truth was, she could have probably solved the whole room herself. She held back because more than anything else, all she wanted was to see that beautiful look of delight on Sasha’s face. It could—and should—have been enough to see it the once, but what makes Marcy unbelievably nervous is the fact that she wants to see it until the stars blink out of existence.

Maybe it’s better if they just get out of here already and go get pizza or something and cut their losses. It’s enough to spend time with Sasha, something she’d never really gotten enough of. She’d always loved how fierce and independent Sasha was—had wanted to be more like her, and realized at some point it wasn’t just inspiration, but ***admiration***.

Marcy frowns, looks up, then lets out a sigh. “This one’s deadbolted—I can’t use the card trick on it. Sash, would you mind…?”

To her surprise, Sasha hesitates. “I don’t know, Marcy,” she says. “It didn’t work on the last two doors I tried it on.”

It breaks Marcy's heart to see her hesitate like that, and before she even realizes it, she's putting her phone down on the neurologist's desk and going over to Sasha, taking her hands in both of her own. "You're ***Sasha Waybright***. You're the strongest person I know. You saved me from getting eaten by a giant lava-worm and crushed by a giant rolling rock, and you cut me out of the void hell that the Core put me in. If ***anyone*** can kick down this door and get us the heck out of here, it's you."

Sasha blinks, her mouth falling open. "Oh," she says.

"I mean it," Marcy says earnestly.

Glancing between Marcy and the door, Sasha asks, so casually that it takes Marcy a second to process it: "Can I get a kiss for good luck?"

In the second between her processing the question and Sasha opening her mouth, probably (Marcy hopes not) trying to take it back, Marcy goes for it.

Maybe what happens next is a consequence of wanting to kiss someone for so, so long—over a decade—that your imagination fails to manifest reality.

Her lips land on Sasha's cheek.

Damn. Nervously, she laughs, and Sasha joins her with a slightly awkward laugh of her own. "You got this," Marcy says, and offers a thumbs up, which feels ridiculous.

Sasha nods, then ***rolls her sleeves up*** and starts kicking the door right at the deadbolt point.

Bam! goes the first kick, and Marcy nervously holds her phone flashlight towards the door, hoping that her motivational speech won't go out the window.

Bam! goes the second kick. Sasha's shoulders tighten with waning belief; she bites her lip and glances at Marcy, who nods, her eyes urging Sasha not to give up.

On the third kick, the door flies open, and Marcy's breath leaves her in one pent-up huff, even as Sasha is catching her own breath.

"Whew!" Sasha exclaims, and turns to face the lobby, which is empty.

Marcy bursts out, "You did it!" and throws her arms around Sasha, who laughs tiredly and pats her. She retreats quickly, pulling a water bottle from her bag and handing it to Sasha so she can mask her adoration. Instead of looking at Sasha, she inspects their surroundings. "Wow, there is ***no one*** here, huh? Did we get transported to a horror game or something?"

"Wouldn't be the first time we got isekai'd," Sasha mutters, taking a swig of the water bottle and murmuring her thanks, to which Marcy just shakes her head. "Do you think everyone else is dead?"

Running footsteps echo up the stairs they had gone down to get into the room in the first place, and then Jaina is in view. "Oh my god," they say. "You're out—are you two okay? We were trying to get to you, but the power outage made one of our props fall out of its closet and across the door, and it was way too heavy for us to pick up by ourselves so we called the fire department!"

Marcy can't help it—she starts laughing hysterically, and Sasha starts wheezing with laughter of her own, clutching at her shoulders.

Once she can collect herself, Marcy says, wiping tears from her eyes, "Yeah, we're good. Sorry, it's just—we literally escaped the escape room." Jaina does laugh at that, and she counts that as a win in her book. "Is there any chance we can still get the picture even though we kind of brute forced our way through?"

At Jaina's acquiescence, Sasha hands her phone over and then puts her arm around Marcy's waist, which sends shivers up Marcy's spine—the place where her fingers curve against the dip of her waist is on fire, and Marcy can't help grinning for the pictures.

After a few shots, a thought occurs to her. "Wait," she says hurriedly. "Can we get one more silly one?"

She turns to Sasha and, before her courage can fail her, asks: "Do you wanna do a kiss for the picture?"

"Yeah, for the picture, sure," Sasha says, a breathless quality to her voice.

"Ready?" asks Jaina, and Marcy's stomach flips like she's on a high diving board, about to dive while all the kids behind her wait for their turn, impatient for her to get over her fear and just ***jump already***.

She turns her face up to Sasha's like a flower aching for warmth.

With so much gentleness, Sasha tips her chin up and leans down, pressing a soft kiss to her mouth, and in that split second between the contact and the spark of every single nerve ending in her body erupting into wild electricity, she thinks, ***Oh***.

She hadn't dared to imagine what it would be like to kiss Sasha Waybright for the first time. There had been no expectations to measure it against because she hadn't allowed herself to even ***fathom*** a situation in which something like this could or would ever happen.

Marcy had talked such a big game back in the escape room's first area. It was easy to chase her dream of being an artist under the guise of life being too short not to go after what you want—after all, the only person that dream involved was her. This is a different creature altogether.

"Okay!" Jaina says brightly. "We got the pictures!"

Marcy takes a shaky breath as she and Sasha reluctantly break apart, wetting her lips as if the act could put her right back in the thick of that kiss, a hope sitting on her sternum that maybe, just maybe, she won't make a hypocrite of herself after all.

XXX

They start walking back to their apartment like the world hasn't just shifted beneath them.

Sasha's still thinking about that kiss—is Marcy still thinking about that kiss? She had fully intended on making it just a quick peck, and then her lips had met Marcy's lips and something short-circuited in her brain, and—well.

Now Marcy's reaching out a pinkie and hooking it around her pinkie. And may any divinity in the multiverse help her, she sure is wrapped around Marcy's little finger, isn't she?

"Y'know," Marcy says thoughtfully. "Even though we didn't get to unlock the mystery, I still had a pretty good time. We actually escaped with our lives! And when you broke down the door?"

Sasha laughs. "Well, I couldn't have done it without that good luck kiss." She pauses, and then asks, because Marcy was right and life is short: "Hey, so what you said about falling out of love, back there. What did you mean?"

The pinkie around hers tightens a little, and then Marcy asks, "What did you think I meant?"

"I think you know," Sasha says, and starts twining their fingers together. "I regretted it for a long time, you know. Not giving you the attention you wanted—deserved," she corrects herself. "You were always right in front of my face, and I was just so ***oblivious***, you were ***right there***, just…always ready with a plan or a scheme or some obscure skill. I was always so impressed with you."

Marcy laughs shyly. "I always kind of hoped you would be."

Sasha stops walking, and Marcy turns to face her, quizzical expression in full bloom. "What I'm trying to say, Mars," says Sasha, yearning for her understanding, "is that once I realized how much of an idiot I was being, I understood that I didn't want to let you go. You were so important—I had just figured it out—but I couldn't smother you. So I didn't fall out of love with you, either. Kind of the opposite."

Surprise sets in on Marcy's face as she looks into Sasha's eyes, her gaze intense. She looks so beautiful set against the reddening sky, its sunset hues casting her in a honey-kissed glow, soft clouds banking the vivid oranges and pinks, the palm trees framing her. Sasha wishes she could take a picture, but she's not going to be forgetting this sight anytime soon.

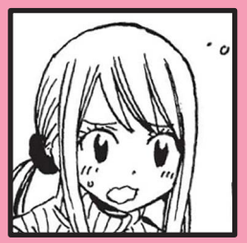
"Can I get a kiss?" Marcy whispers. "Just for me this time."

Her mouth dry, Sasha can't help but reply helplessly: "You can have whatever you want forever."

And against the California sunset, she cups Marcy's face in her hands as their lips meet again, a wildfire blazing bright in the cleared air.

MODERATORS

CosmicDiamond
Head Mod
cosmic_dia
cosmic.dia
diadraws



Oly
Co-Head, Production & Merch Mod
curseoftheduck
mithrilduck

Bugsbian
Production & Merch Mod
bugsbian
bugsbiann

Ivy Pond
Merch Mod
ivypond11
ivypond

Sidney
Art Mod
muttoney

Sam
Art Mod
samecats
skybulb

Raúl
Art Mod
ZoroStarz
zoro.starz

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Social Media & Graphics Mod
dontouchperi

Arcel
Social Media & Graphics Mod
applelcalmarket
yourlocalapplemarket

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Writing Mod
Nosferatank
banyanas

Nyx
Writing Mod
kaseyskat

ivysauruz
Discord Server Mod
sundewboop

Breezy
Discord Server Mod
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just-loud-stuff

Star
Formatting Mod
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MERCHANDISE

Phone Wallpaper

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mithrilduck

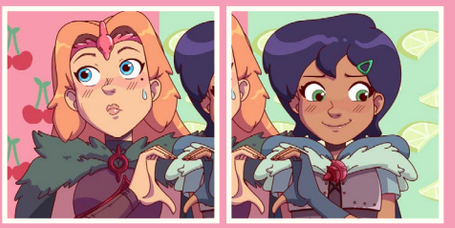
Aita
aita_draws
aitadraws

Desktop Wallpaper

Ivy Pond
ivypond11
ivypond

Icons

Ivy Pond
ivypond11
ivypond



Plaggy
dontouchperi

Video Edit

INNERLMNT
innerlmnt
inner.lmnt

MERCHANDISE

Campaign Goal Sticker

Vinnie
kyoryuv
kyoryu

Stretch Goals
Character Card

Claus
clausilly
insulationsun

Magnet

Oly
curseoftheduck
mithrilduck

Stretch Goals
Enamel Pin

Ivy Pond
ivypond11
ivypond

Standee

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MERCHANDISE

Print Set

Lynn
feeblephrog

Washi Tape

ACartoonDork
a_cartoon_dork

Button Set

Bear
jojo_bearoo
jojobearoo

Lanyard

Min
MarcyMarMar28
marcyminmin

Chain Pin

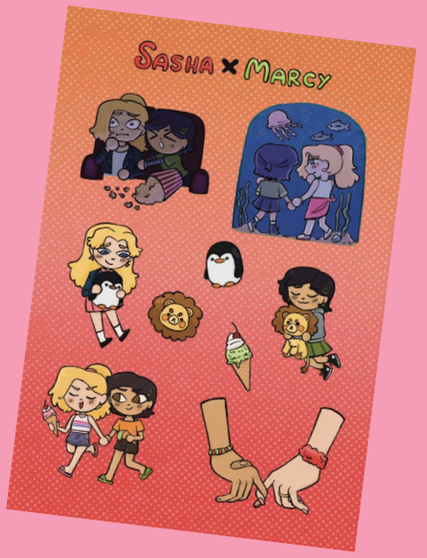
Ivy Pond
ivypond11
ivypond

MERCHANDISE

Stickers

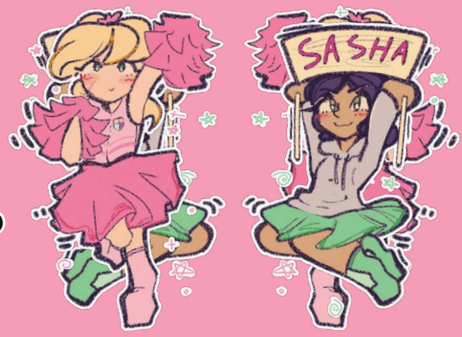
Oly
curseoftheduck
mithrilduck

SalNeedsCoffee
salneedscoffee



Pearlshroom
Pearlshroom

Acrylic Charms



Captain.Yoohoo
captainyoohoo
captain.yoohoo

Axialux
axialux

therubysaurusrex
therubysaurus
therubysaurusrex

WRITERS

Idori
Sock11037
midnightcrossroads

Puddlesock
hey-its-puddlesock

Blair
Nosferatank
banyanas

Arcadi
arcadiwrites
arcadiii
arcadi

Mar
saotomexmary

Joanie
ruminescing
bardicspiration
fictitiousregrets

SPOT ARTISTS

Amory Lang (huath3art)
huath3art

Junepegbert
junepegbert

Oly
curseoftheduck
mithrilduck

mood-owl
moodtheowl
mood-owl

iersei
iersei

Ivy Pond
ivypond11
ivypond

COMIC ARTISTS

Fridge
yohannahgoldkamp

Vinnie
kyoryuv
kyoryu

IvySundews
ivysundews

Linkcalm
linkcalm

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cosmic.dia
diadraws

SPREAD ARTISTS

CuteTanuki-chan
cutetanuki_chan
cutetanuki-chan

Froggman
froggman_
froggieland

Bubba The Saur
bubbathesaur

Furaneesu
furaneesu

KC
BrushBanditArts

PAGE ARTISTS

Meowmiint
meowmiint

Aita
aita_draws
aitadraws

mood-owl
moodtheowl
mood-owl

NightThinker_08
NightThinker_08
NightThinker-08

Sam
samecats
skybulb

Foggy
foggy_dragon
ffoggy_dragon

IceyMoonShards
LazyPigeonz
IceyMoonShards

Sidney
muttoney

Bugsbian
bugsbian
bugsbiann

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sketchz42
sketchz

PUNKRAY
pvnkray
punkray

Shelby
shellani

Oly
curseoftheduck
mithrilduck

oh2bloved
oh2bloved

Kitsastik
kitsastik

Starryemeralds
starryemeralds
starryemeraldsart

aletadepez
AletadePezs
aletadepez

Toasty Owl
Toasty_Owl_Arts
Toasty-Owl-Arts

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maodoodles
maodoodle

Jacketpotatoo
jacketpotatoo

Kami (goodartitude)
goodartitude

Bear
jojo_bearoo
jojobearoo

Foxbloggr
foxbloggr

iersei
iersei

Meeblesmeeb
carrotsucker64
meeblesmeeb

COVER ARTIST

Jaywuzhere
jaywuzhere
jaywuzheree

CaptainYoohoo
AKA Bowie!!

Arael.M
Apple market

Keep sasharcy'ing
-breezy

LINK
CALM

PUNKRAYE

Puddles

JAY
Wuz Here!

BUGSBEAN

MOOD - OWL

@IceyMoonShards

FROGMAN

Starry
thank you!

aita

XO
sasharcy rulz

JACKET POTATOO
UP
24

2024
@BrushBanditArts

Ivy
Pond

Leebs

SAL
needs
coffee

Fridge

Kitsattiks

Kami

FURANEESU

Shelby

Rubba

Oly
JunePEgbert
satome × mary
marigold
THANK YOU!!
AIETADEPEZ
LOVE YOU CL!
~Plaggy
(AKA CRINGEPHIBIA)
sketchiz92
Blair
Star
jojobear
thank you!
KURYUU
OhBlaer!:]
COSMIC DIAMOND
Abir

Pearlshroom
TERSEI
THANK YOU!
Thank You!
2 Min
Foxbloggr
ubysaurus
Toasty
CLAUS
Night
Ddori
ARCADI
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MaodoodleS

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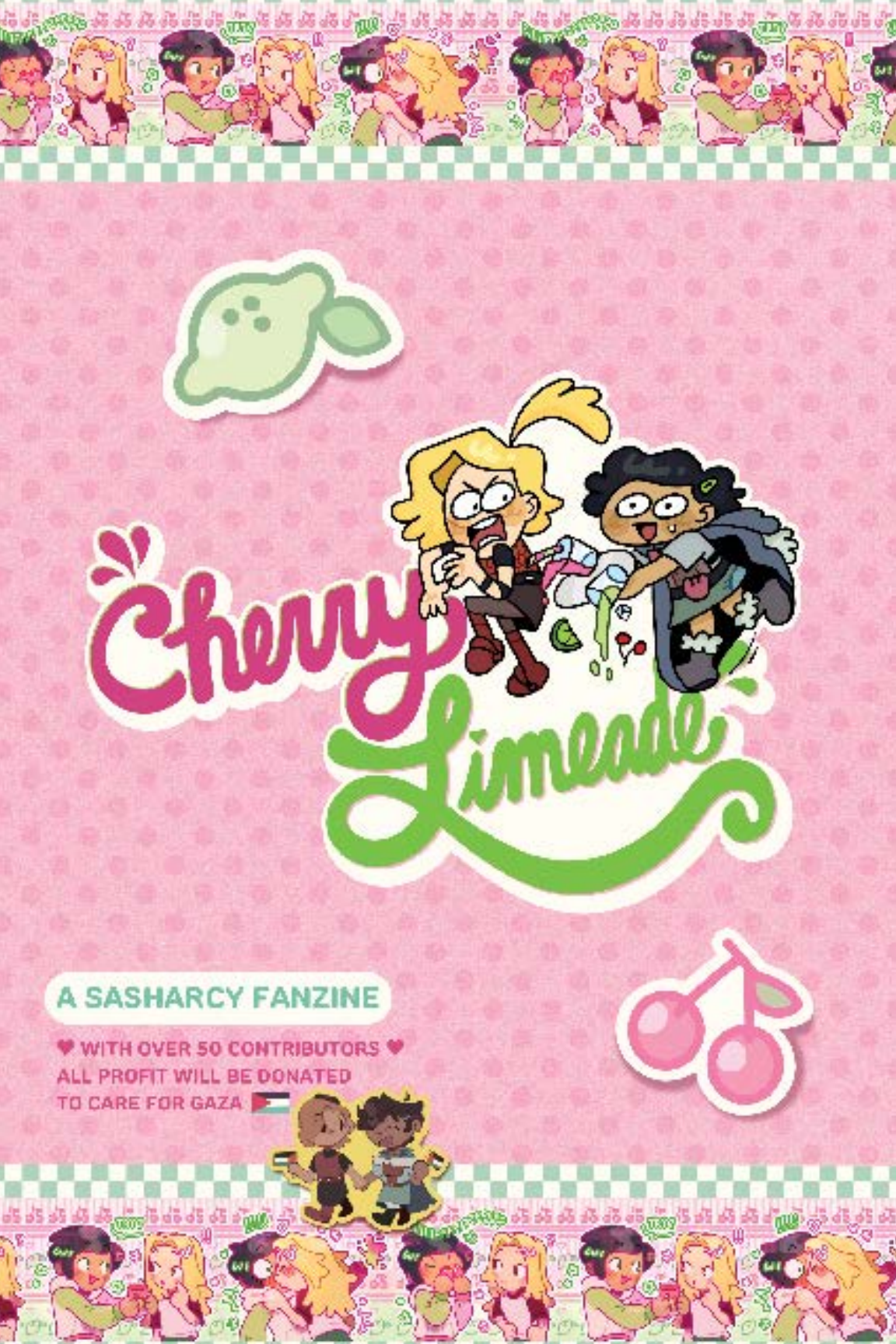
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